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More Friends, More War

by Doug Bandow

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NATO expansion is simply a bad idea. Alliances and security guarantees once were viewed as the most serious commitments a nation could make. As the world's dominant power, Great Britain long eschewed making military guarantees to any country. Throughout its early history the United States, too, studiously avoided permanent military attachments. Even during World War I Washington fought as an "associated power," rather than a formal member of the allied Entente.

Today, however, Washington hands out security guarantees the way hotels provide chocolates: one on every pillow, with an extra candy for anyone who asks. The commitments are viewed as costless. Indeed, the common assumption is that alliance guarantees automatically prevent war, and thus never need be implemented. It's a wonder that alliance advocates have not suggested that the United States promise to defend every nation against attack by every other nation, since, given the prevailing theory, doing so should inaugurate an era of perpetual peace.

NATO expansion is promoted with the greatest enthusiasm. It also is one of the most critical disputes between America and Russia. Moscow held war games in the Caucasus shortly after NATO's military exercises in Georgia. During President Barack Obama's summit visit to Moscow the two governments reached agreement over reductions in nuclear armaments, not Georgia's entry into NATO.

The argument for incorporating Tbilisi into the alliance reflects fear of Russian domination of the region, yet it is striking how ineffective Moscow has been in intimidating members of the "near abroad." If anything, the war with Georgia appears to have reduced Russia's clout. Observes Ellen Barry in the *New York Times*: "Rather than being cowed into obedience, as most Western observers feared, the former republics seem to have grown even more protective of their sovereignty."

In any case, expanding NATO into the Caucasus is no solution. Washington has nothing to gain from antagonizing Russia and much to lose. Moscow has agreed to open its airspace for the United States to supply the latter's forces in Afghanistan. America is seeking Russian cooperation against Iran and North Korea. Arms control and energy supplies also are on the agenda. Most important, the United States wants to forge a stable relationship with the world's second biggest nuclear power to reduce the potential for war. Further expanding NATO would make all of these objectives harder to achieve.

The North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, now more than sixty years old, was created with a specific purpose: to protect Western Europe from Soviet aggression. Although it played a political role, its core mission was military. Having just fought Nazi Germany to liberate Europe, the United States was not prepared to accept Soviet domination of the continent.

NATO's mission disappeared two decades ago when the Berlin wall fell, the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the Soviet Union collapsed. For a time policy makers actually questioned the alliance's future. What, pray tell, would the anti-Soviet alliance do without a Soviet Union?

But NATO quickly found new tasks. First, it became a parallel European Union, serving as an organization to unite the old Soviet empire with "old" Europe. Second, it became a tool to conduct "out of area" military actions.

Neither role makes much sense from America's standpoint. The EU always was far better equipped to promote the development of democratic capitalism in the former communist countries. "Out of area" operations in Europe, such as Kosovo, served European rather than American interests. Moreover, most alliance members have proved unwilling to provide meaningful backing for U.S. operations elsewhere, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

In short, whatever the continuing value of NATO for Europe, it has ceased to serve a serious security role for the United States.

Yet rather than reduce America's continental military commitments, Washington has been promising to go to war for ever more countries. Albania and Croatia have just joined NATO—Americans are now on the hook to defend these two from threats unknown. So, too, with the Baltic nations, formerly part of both the Soviet Union and imperial Russia. The Bush administration vigorously pushed NATO to move even further east, advocating the addition of Georgia and Ukraine. How are Georgia and Ukraine related to American security? Not at all. There's an obvious reason to wish them well as independent states. Neither lives up to the images cultivated in the West; moreover, evidence abounds that Tbilisi shares the blame for the war last August. But even if these two countries were paragons of democratic virtue, Washington should not threaten to go to war on their behalf.

Don't worry, say NATO expansion advocates. The United States would never have to make good on its promises. After all, Russia would never dare challenge America.

More specifically, if only in April 2008 NATO had moved Tbilisi closer to membership, Russia would never have risked going to war. Sally McNamara of the Heritage Foundation writes: "Although it is completely un-testable, it is worth pondering whether Russia would've invaded Georgia if Germany and France hadn't colluded with Moscow to deny Georgia NATO's Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008."

Even more so, if NATO invited Georgia to join, runs the argument, Moscow would never consider challenging the alliance. Issue the Article V guarantee, and all opponents—in this case Russia—would shrink back in fear and horror. Faced with the threat of allied—in this case really meaning American—intervention, Moscow would never act against Georgia, irrespective of circumstance.

Neither argument withstands scrutiny.

Precious little is known about decision making in the Putin-Medvedev government. Nevertheless, Moscow has demonstrated that it views border security as worth war. It would not be enough for Washington to threaten war to defend Georgia. Russia would have to believe the threat, that it lacks the ability to deter Washington from carrying out the threat and that it would not prevail in whatever confrontation might occur. How likely would a Membership Action Plan (MAP) or full NATO membership be to convince Moscow?

First, the United States and Europe have spent more than a decade expanding their relationship with Georgia. Tbilisi joined the NATO-run North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 and the Partnership for Peace in 1996. Two years later Georgia submitted its first Individual Partnership Plan. In 1997, Georgia approved a status of forces agreement and a year later established official ambassadorial relations with the alliance. The first joint military action was held in 2001. Tbilisi began its efforts to join NATO in 2005. In June 2008, the NATO Trust Fund Project, designed to pay for eliminating old missile stockpiles, was established. Two weeks before the Georgia-Russia war, a NATO Maritime Group visited Batumi, Georgia. (After the war with Russia, the NATO-Georgia Commission was established, according to NATO, to "serve as a forum for both political consultations and practical cooperation to help Georgia achieve its goal of membership in NATO.")

The United States has been particularly solicitous of Tbilisi. Total financial assistance for Georgia so far approaches \$2 billion. Military aid began in 2002. Three years later, Washington initiated the

Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program. In 2007 Georgia contributed troops, flown home by America after the Russian invasion last year, to the Iraqi occupation. Washington then promised an additional \$1 billion in assistance through next year. President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice all visited Georgia. Last January, Washington signed an agreement with Georgia to establish a “strategic partnership.” In short, by all evidence last August Georgia remained on the road to NATO despite the April detour. Moreover, the United States had done everything possible to suggest that Tbilisi was a close geopolitical and even military ally.

Would adding MAP make any difference? MAP neither carries a security commitment nor even guarantees NATO membership. Ironically, to the extent that Moscow feared the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia, establishing MAP might have accelerated war. Then Russia would have had an incentive to attack before Tbilisi enjoyed the benefits of an Article 5 security guarantee.

No more effective would be other measures recently suggested to bolster Tbilisi, including reiterating the West’s commitment to Georgian sovereignty and increasing nonmilitary ties with the Georgian government. What about NATO membership, carrying Washington’s promise to go to war? Maybe, but history is replete with examples of alliances that fail to stop conflict. And when deterrence fails, they become transmission belts of war.

The worst war of human history, World War II, began despite the extension of security guarantees designed to deter conflict. Both France and Great Britain promised to go to war if Germany attacked Poland. Germany attacked Poland and both France and Great Britain ended up at war with Germany. One can argue about whether the commitments to Poland were prudent. But they obviously failed to deter war.

Japan entered the war by attacking British and Dutch colonies in East Asia. Tokyo simultaneously attacked the Philippines and Pearl Harbor, guaranteed to bring the United States into the war as well. Japan was not deterred.

World War I provided an even more dramatic example of alliances expanding rather than restricting conflict. The Entente squared off against the Central Powers. Both sides believed the other one would back down and, if not, that war was both necessary and winnable. So much for the deterrent value of security guarantees.

The phenomenon of deterrence failing to prevent war is not limited to the twentieth century. Alliances have been common throughout history and conflicts with and between alliances have been almost as common. The causes of war are complex and some alliances were created for offensive rather than defensive purposes.

Nevertheless, nations have routinely ignored security guarantees issued by third and fourth countries and gone to war nonetheless. The Peloponnesian War, which occurred in the fifth century BC, featured opposing alliances: the Delian League, led by Athens, and the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta. The respective groupings expanded, intensified, and prolonged conflict rather than preventing it.

The Roman Republic was part of and fought against alliances. Countervailing agreements and confederations did not deter it from conducting the Samnite Wars and the Latin War. The First Punic War grew out of intervention on behalf of allies against states backed by the other power. Carthage invaded Italy in the Second Punic War despite Rome’s alliance with nearby states.

The Thirty Years’ War featured the League of Evangelical Union versus the Catholic League (and more territories as the conflict developed). In the Anglo-Dutch wars, both the English and Dutch possessed allies. French King Louis XIV’s aggressive empire-building spawned a broad alliance against him, but did little to curb his ambitions, leading to the Nine Years’ War. The eighteenth century featured a series of conflicts among a kaleidoscope constantly changing coalitions. Every government was aware that initiating war likely would entail conflict with several states, yet that did

not prevent the War of the Spanish Succession, War of the Quadruple Alliance, Austro-Russo-Turkish War, Russo-Turkish War, War of the Polish Succession, Seven Years' War and Crimean War.

Although France was the dominant single power during the Napoleonic wars, there were alliances and coalitions on both sides. Paris could assume that any continental military action would bring it against an alliance including Great Britain, France's constant opponent—but Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte rarely hesitated in acting militarily, including invading (most disastrously) Russia. Before World War I, the members of the anti-Ottoman coalition in the First Balkan War had a falling out, leading Bulgaria to turn on its erstwhile allies.

Most of these conflicts were extraordinarily complex and assessing the exact role of alliances in restraining or promoting war is difficult. Noteworthy, however, is how often alliance memberships and security guarantees did not prevent conflict.

In many cases, contending parties either discount the likelihood of countries acting on their promises or believe the stakes warrant risking war. Both likely apply to Russia in Georgia. Moscow has far greater interests in the region, diminishing the likelihood of U.S. intervention. Moreover, in the event of war, Russia can more easily intervene initially and counter American action, forcing Washington to take the greater risk of escalating. If an outsider had to bet on which country would back down in a crisis, the odds would have to be on the United States.

Georgia is located in a bad geopolitical neighborhood. Even so, Moscow seems unlikely to attempt to conquer its southern neighbor; the price of occupation would be excessive and perpetual. (The far larger Ukraine would be even less digestible.) However, Russia undoubtedly hopes to reestablish predominant influence in the region and secure its border.

There's good reason for Americans to be sympathetic to the Georgian people, who have been ill-served by their own government as well as mistreated by Russian military forces. But that does not warrant extending security guarantees to Tbilisi. In fact, bringing Georgia into NATO defeats the original purpose of the alliance: enhancing American security.

It won't be easy for Washington to climb down from its advocacy of NATO membership. Indeed, in advance of the U.S.-Russian summit, White House aide Michael McFaul declared: "We're not going to reassure or give or trade . . . anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion." But no public deal is necessary. The Obama administration could simply stop pressuring the Europeans to extend an invitation to Tbilisi.

Doing so would not indicate any sympathy for Russia's more authoritarian direction. But doing so would put American security first. The United States managed to get through the entire cold war without the conflict turning hot. It makes no sense to unnecessarily risk war with Russia today. Or, to put it more crudely, to risk Washington for Tbilisi.

Contrary to the claims of NATO expansion advocates, alliance membership does not provide a free lunch. Throughout history, many alliances have acted as transmission belts of war rather than as firebreaks for war. There is no reason to expect NATO to be any different.

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