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# NATO: The Strange Alliance Getting Stranger

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NATO is simultaneously expanding and hollowing out, a dangerous combination that is being little considered in the current anemic debate over NATO enlargement, a debate largely devoid of historical and strategic context. This writer does not oppose admitting new members in Central Europe but believes the question of NATO expansion is being badly framed. We may wish to expand NATO, but we must understand that such a move has geostrategic consequences and must be followed through with sufficient power.

Czech President Vaclav Havel argues that Central Europe rightfully deserves to join Europe, and NATO membership is an important cultural and spiritual symbol to that end.[1] But symbols aren't enough; they require a commitment of resources that few NATO members are willing to make. We must ask what does the expansion of a problematic alliance accomplish in strategic terms. Without such understanding, expansion could turn an already strange alliance into a meaningless gesture.

## What the Treaty Says

Several points escape public (and even congressional) notice in the current debate about new members. The operative clause of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty is the famous Article 5:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all; and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them . . . will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith . . . such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.[2]

The "attack against all" is the standard operative phrase of treaties of alliance. But NATO is a good deal more than that. What gives NATO credibility is a series of non-binding commitments above and beyond the Treaty wording.

## What the Treaty Does Not Say

Contrary to what most Americans associate with NATO, there is nothing in the Treaty that requires:

- Military action in case members are attacked
- A unified command structure
- Members' participation in a unified command
- Members to maintain military forces at certain levels
- US troops to be stationed in Europe

If NATO is a "strong" alliance, its strength comes from these subsequent usages and interpretations. No treaty obliges any NATO member, including the United States, to any of the above. They have been read into NATO later and can be altered or interpreted flexibly. US adherence to them is mostly by unilateral US actions and executive agreements.

Let us consider them one at a time. The language of Article 5 merely requires each adherent to take "such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force" but not requiring it. If that phrase were interpreted literally by an

adversary, NATO would be little more than a paper alliance without much deterrent or defensive value. The adversary would figure, "By offers of 'peaceful coexistence' I shall encourage NATO members to interpret Article 5 in an individualistic fashion and thus undermine and divide NATO cohesion." This, of course, is precisely what the Soviet Union attempted to do, with the active complicity of Charles de Gaulle.

## **NAT Without the O**

How to overcome the inherent vagueness of Article 5 and turn NATO into a serious proposition? The North Korean attack in 1950 jolted NATO signatories into joining a unified command structure, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE), located first in Paris and then just outside of Brussels. The integration of forces, initially under General Eisenhower, is what gave NATO its unique character and made it arguably history's most effective defensive alliance. Now an attack would indeed be met by concerted military action. But this integration, which is at the very heart of NATO, is nowhere required by treaty or statute.

Initially, all members agreed to participate in the unified command with at least part of their forces. By 1966, though, President de Gaulle, who combined shrewd calculation and peevish nationalism, decided French interests would best be served if France were outside of the command structure. He withdrew France from SHAPE in 1967 and ordered the headquarters from French territory. But notice that France was still very much a treaty member; it just was no longer in the unified command. Spain accepted membership in 1982 with similar reservations about placing its forces under NATO command. Countries can be in NAT without the O.

Each NATO member decides what level of armed forces to maintain, ranging from zero for Iceland to highs of 3.6 million for the United States in 1952 and 3.5 million in 1968, figures related, respectively, to conflict in Korea and Vietnam. The question is strictly under the sovereignty of each member; no outside power can compel, persuade, or cajole members to increase defense spending or numbers of soldiers. The United States has tried repeatedly and with scant success. Every American President since Truman has promised Congress he would get the Europeans to "do more" in their own defense. And every US Congress since Truman has expressed dismay at the Europeans' low levels of defense spending.

## **The "Great Debate" of 1951**

By the same token, the United States is under no obligation to station forces in Europe. When the Treaty was signed in 1949, there were few US troops in Europe. Washington's attitude changed during the Korean War, when it seemed likely that Stalin was planning something similar against Western Europe. On 9 September 1950, President Truman triggered the "troops to Europe" debate by announcing the dispatch of two US divisions (later increased to four) to Germany.

Many in Congress objected, especially the traditionally isolationist Midwest Republicans led by Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. Their concerns were threefold: strategic, economic, and constitutional. Former President Herbert Hoover on 20 December 1950 gave the strategic and economic arguments on national radio, blasting the "rash involvement of our forces in a hopeless campaign," and observing that aiding the Europeans would rob them of any incentive to defend themselves. On top of the Marshall Plan, huge US funding would be required. Hoover urged the United States to look after its air and naval forces and become the "Gibraltar of Western civilization"--on this side of the Atlantic.[3]

Senator Taft gave the constitutional argument in a floor speech on 5 January 1951. He seconded Hoover's concerns but emphasized that President Truman had no legal right to commit US forces abroad. Truman had been conducting foreign and defense policy "without consulting the Congress or the people." Specifically, charged Taft, the President "has no power to agree to send American troops to fight in Europe in a war between members of the Atlantic Pact and Soviet Russia. Without authority he involved us in the Korean war. Without authority he apparently is now adopting a similar policy in Europe." [4]

Congress at that time was enraged at President Truman for conducting a war in Korea without benefit of a congressional declaration of war. Truman claimed it was a "police action" under UN sanction. To Congress, Truman's "troops to Europe" was yet another usurpation of the powers the Constitution gave to Congress, an argument long used in congressional opposition to executive moves. In 1951, of course, Congress and the nation took the question of

NATO seriously. It is a measure of the declining relevance of foreign policy that similar strategic, economic, and constitutional arguments have scarcely been raised in 1997 or 1998.

Support for Truman's position on troops to Europe came from the Republican internationalist wing, and this swung the issue. General Eisenhower, fresh from his SHAPE command, informally addressed both houses in the Library of Congress on 1 February and said "there is no acceptable alternative." Attempts to limit the President's power to send US troops to Europe were beaten back.

The troops are in Europe because Presidents have wanted them there, and Congress (sometimes grudgingly) acquiesces in this assertion of presidential authority. But there is no constitutional or statutory provision for keeping US forces in Europe. For much of the Cold War over 300,000 US troops were stationed in Europe, most in Germany. This number dipped considerably during Vietnam, as units were cannibalized and left understrength. Now there are some 100,000 US forces in Europe, far too few for anything serious. The point is that Presidents can make this number go up or down as they deem necessary. No legal instrument--no treaty, constitutional provision, or statute--locks the United States into any particular number.

### **"Free Rider" Europe**

In a way, the Republican opponents of Truman's "troops to Europe" were right. With a major US troop presence and under a US nuclear umbrella, Europe's NATO members have generally refrained from exerting themselves in the defense area. During the Cold War, the United States spent more on the defense of Europe than the Europeans did. This imbalance has led to a classic "free-rider" syndrome: Why buy a ticket when you can ride for free? Europe's early enthusiasm for expanding NATO by five instead of three new members (adding Slovenia and Romania) is understandable: The free riders were inviting others to ride for free.

The imbalance still obtains. In 1996 the United States spent \$269 billion on defense, 60 percent more than all other NATO members combined (their total: \$167 billion).[5] Of the US outlays, an estimated \$100 billion a year goes directly or indirectly for the security and stability of West Europe. The United States, to be sure, has strategic responsibilities beyond Europe. Some of them, though, directly benefit the Europeans, as in the US commitment to making sure Persian Gulf oil flows and keeping East Asia secure for European investment.

Other NATO members have more active-duty military personnel, totaling 2.6 million, than the United States. Most NATO members still have conscription. Not all of these troops, however, are under NATO command; many are reserved for other duties. Only Germany has placed all its troops under NATO command. After the United States, Turkey has the largest armed forces, 639,000, but most of them are assigned to domestic duties, chief among them repressing the Kurdish revolt in the southeast of Turkey.

What made NATO both effective and lopsided was the firm but unspoken understanding that America will defend Europe but not vice-versa. The flow of troops and money was to be strictly one-way, from America to Europe. There are no conceivable circumstances in which Europe would come to the aid of America, but partisans of Atlantic security could argue that by defending Europe we were defending ourselves. We were preventing aggression before it happened. Our European partners had no parallel motivation to come to our aid. They politely declined to participate in Vietnam; it was "out of area." If NATO had been in effect in December 1941, no Europeans would have been obliged by the Treaty to come to our aid, as Hawaii is not in North America.

Absent the Soviet threat, can the imbalance of costs and responsibilities endure? The current debate over new members failed to awaken the now-forgotten debate over an entangling alliance. US public and congressional opinion has never liked the one-way flow of troops and money. And money is the key. Typically, Congress endorses executive initiatives for America to take a leading role in defending freedom and stability in the world but balks at spending the money for it. We can predict an overwhelming Senate vote to ratify NATO expansion, although some senators have reservations. Most, however, will heed their Polish-American constituents. But will Congress pay to modernize the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian armies and bring them up to NATO standards? These armies are in much worse shape than previously thought in both materiel and personnel. Particularly lacking: sergeants, the backbone of a modern army. Noncommissioned officer corps for all three armies will have to be created from scratch. Who pays?

All NATO members, including the United States, are now cutting their defense expenditures and troop levels. For Europeans, this is perfectly logical. Europe is at peace; threats are few and small. And Europe is under even tougher budgetary constraints than the United States. With massive unemployment and overlarge welfare states, some European Union members are struggling to meet the macroeconomic "convergence criteria" to allow them to start using the euro currency on 1 January 1999.[6] Inherent policy contradictions suggest that either the euro's debut will be postponed or the criteria will be so relaxed that the euro could be a "soft" (inflation-prone) currency that few will want to hold. Under such pressures, European defense expenditures will likely continue to decline. In Washington, congressional eagerness to see the US budget balanced indicates our defense expenditures cannot go up by much. It may even be difficult to keep the US Army at its recently downsized strength of ten divisions.

### **Hungary's Geographic Problem**

Admitting Hungary into NATO brings with it a little-discussed geographic problem: Hungary would be an island, difficult to reach and defend in a crisis. It will border no other NATO member country. Some may point out that Greece and Turkey are also removed from the main NATO area, but they are handily reached by sea.[7] The 1955 Austrian State Treaty, which is still in effect, guarantees Austrian neutrality and is why the United States--had it wished to--could not come to the aid of Hungarian freedom fighters in 1956. To do so would have violated the very treaty the United States had just enthusiastically signed the year before. (We had pushed for the Austria treaty because it got the Soviets out of the eastern third of Austria.) We do not need a replay of this unfortunate situation.

The ideal solution to this problem would be Austria joining NATO, but Austria--like Switzerland a free rider, enjoying NATO and US protection at no cost--shows little interest in opting out of its neutral status. Another solution, backed by Italy, is to admit Slovenia into NATO. This northwest corner of old Yugoslavia indeed connects Italy with Hungary, but it is extremely mountainous and has only one road and no rail line to Hungary. Any major movements would have to transit Croatia, and Zagreb would likely permit them, as they would bring Croatia under implied NATO protection against Serbia. We may not wish to get any more involved with that can of worms than we already are.

Another solution to Hungary's geographic isolation would be to admit Slovakia into NATO, but Slovakia does not yet have the democratic credentials to be a candidate for membership. Besides, Slovakia has long-running feuds with Hungary concerning language rights for the Hungarian minority along Slovakia's southern border and a Danube-diversion project. Until World War I, Slovakia was part of Hungary, and Slovak nationalists, now in power in Bratislava, still resent Hungary. Without NATO membership as part of the bargain, Bratislava may not allow a NATO transit through Slovakia to Hungary.

This brings up another problem with Hungarian geography: It has difficulties on three borders. The 1920 Treaty of Trianon gave 72 percent of pre-World War I Hungary, with 64 percent of its population, to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. During World War II Hungary, a German ally, temporarily regained part of its lost kingdom. Although there are currently no claims to change any borders, Hungary is still concerned about ethnic Magyars in Slovakia, Transylvania, and Voivodina (the part of Serbia north of Belgrade). Particularly difficult is Hungary's border with Serbia; cross-border crime and smuggling are rampant and hard to control. Of all NATO members, Hungary would have by far the biggest ethnic and border problems with neighboring countries, and it would be precisely the hardest country for NATO to defend. This point has not been raised in the current debate.

### **The Russian Problem**

The problem most frequently raised in the current debate--will NATO expansion provoke the Russians?--has been overstated. Will Russia revert to hostility toward the West? Due to what cause? Those opposed to NATO expansion, such as George F. Kennan, argue it will drive Russia into renewed hostility.[8] Some in favor of NATO expansion argue that Russia is already sufficiently hostile--or is soon likely to be--for us to take anticipatory steps.[9]

The current Russian regime could easily fall into the hands of aggressive nationalists--a red-brown coalition ousting a kleptocracy--but it could do this with or without NATO expansion. The growth of Russian nationalism is related to the internal chaos and economic hardship that have been turning many Russians toward demagogues. Public-opinion surveys indicate that NATO expansion is of little interest to most Russians.[10] Most Russians focus on their own economic plight. Opportunistic political figures try to use the issue, but they tend to be the same people who claim the

collapse of the Soviet Union was engineered by the United States, which is now getting ready to move in for the kill. Actually, the possibility of black-helicopter types coming to power in the Kremlin is a plausible reason for NATO to expand into Central Europe.

There is another reason: Chechnya. The horror inflicted by Russian artillery on Grozny should make us pause and ask if this sort of mentality lurks not far under the surface of Moscow's security establishment.[11] Will this be their standard answer to security problems? The good news about Chechnya is that it showed the Russian army as weak and incompetent. In effect, lightly armed Chechen "bandits" beat the Russians and got a (probably unstable) agreement from ex-General Aleksandr Lebed that is little more than a fig leaf for Russian withdrawal. The Russian combination of brutality and military weakness suggests that, if we wish to expand NATO, this is a good time to do it.

There is a middle way that, unfortunately, has never been considered. We should have posed NATO expansion not as all or nothing, now or never. Our best strategy might have been to hold Polish, Czech, and Hungarian cards to be played one at a time as countermoves. An aggressive turn by the Kremlin could have been met by Czech admission to NATO. Further hostile moves by Moscow might have been followed by Hungarian admission. If problems had increased, Poland could have been admitted. Why save the Polish card for last? Poland is the only East European country that has a direct border with Russia (the Kaliningrad exclave), so playing it would have had bigger implications. But it's too late now.

Some argue that expanding NATO now will be like kicking a bully when he's down: He'll be very angry later. The argument can be reversed: When the bully is down is the safest time to kick him. And because he is a bully, he's going to be angry whether you kick him or not. If we had refused to consider expanding NATO into Central Europe, we would have in effect consigned the region to neutral status or worse, thereby giving a geopolitical veto to a weak power. "NATO expansion at its core," editorialized *The New York Times*, "is an effort to erect a Western security zone in Eastern Europe while Russia is too weak to protest." [12]

Does Russia truly have nothing to fear from an enlarged NATO, as Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott insists? [13] If so, what good is NATO? If it is not to dissuade a potential attacker, what will it do to the mutual benefit of its members? Why should Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians wish to join a NATO the Russians do not fear? Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest do not wish to join NATO because it is "nice" but because it provides them with US-backed security. Poles remember full well what it meant in 1956 and 1981 to be threatened with Russian invasion over a defenseless plain. Hungarians remember the crushing of their uprising in 1956. Czechs remember the crushing of their "Prague Spring" in 1968. In public, of course, they emphasize the "nice" aspects of NATO--stabilizer, integrator, and general calmer-downer--but their military calculations focus on how to get free and effective security against the potential power to the east. Who can blame them? Would that Washington show the same kind of shrewd geopolitical reasoning.

We may have bent over too far backwards to assure Moscow the planned expansion is utterly innocuous. With essentially no cards of their own to play, the Russians have been granted elaborate assurances that the enlargement will not threaten them. Fortunately, the assurances stopped short of giving them a veto. But Moscow will be watching closely to see if NATO membership improves Polish defense capabilities. It had better; if it doesn't it will be a dangerous policy of enlargement plus bluff.

## **Welcome to Rio**

There will always be a NATO--well, at least for our lifetimes--just as there will always be a Rio Pact (the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance). The Rio Pact works just fine--because it doesn't have to do anything. The question is whether NATO will have any more substance than the Rio Pact has today, a paper alliance that has fallen into disuse.

The current discussion of NATO expansion reflects a vacuum of geostrategic thought. Into the vacuum rush "nice" arguments for enlargement. Unasked are the tough questions, such as how the power configuration of the world is evolving, and how we should respond to it. Given the present widespread indifference to foreign and defense policy, it is likely we will ask these questions only when it is too late. The question is only secondarily one of admitting Central

European lands into NATO. The primary question is whether NATO will soon be anything more than a paper alliance, with or without new members. What will NATO's military capability be like in a few years? What will it be sufficient for? We could be setting up a situation which arouses Russia without building sufficient countervailing military power to Russia's. You may choose to anger the bear, but if you do you must be loaded for bear.

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## NOTES

1. Czech President Vaclav Havel stresses the "political and spiritual values" and sees NATO "as a guarantor of Euro-American civilization." See Havel, "NATO's Quality of Life," *The New York Times*, 13 May 1997, p. A21.
  2. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (6th ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958), p. 736.
  3. *Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1965), p. 264.
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. Figures from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, as cited in Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Agrees to NATO Plan Pushed by Clinton to Admit Nations from Eastern Bloc," *The New York Times*, 15 May 1997, p. A16.
  6. For a thorough discussion of the complexities of EMU, see David R. Cameron, *Economic and Monetary Union: Transitional Issues and Third-Stage Dilemmas*, Policy Paper No. 4, University of Pittsburgh Center for West European Studies, May 1997.
  7. Unfortunately for NATO stability, Greece and Turkey do border each other.
  8. See George F. Kennan, "A Fateful Error," *The New York Times*, 5 February 1997, p. A23.
  9. For a good discussion of possible Russian reactions, see Richard L. Kugler, "Enlarging NATO: The Russia Factor," National Defense Research Institute, 1997, and Richard Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?" *Foreign Affairs*, 76 (September-October 1997), 65-78.
  10. A February 1997 survey of 1600 Russians found half of them didn't know or didn't care about NATO expansion; 38 percent were negative on it and 14 percent were positive. Michael R. Gordon, "From Public, a Collective Ho-Hum," *The New York Times*, 28 May 1997, p. A10.
  11. To appreciate the depths of the horror of Chechnya, see David Remnick's interviews and descriptions in *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Random House, 1997).
  12. "European Disunion," *The New York Times*, 28 May 1997, p. A20.
  13. Strobe Talbott, "Russia Has Nothing to Fear," *The New York Times*, 18 February 1997, p. A19.
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