

NATO Enlargement

New Strategic Map Strengthens Stability and Freedom

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April 2014

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Introduction

The year 2014 brings several anniversary dates concerning NATO’s historic post-Cold War enlargement to Central and Eastern European nations. Fifteen years ago in spring 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland—having received invitations at the Madrid Summit in 1997—became the first post-Communist countries to join the alliance. A decade ago, March 2004 saw the largest NATO enlargement ever when seven nations – Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – joined NATO as a result of the “Big Bang” enlargement round announced at the November 2002 Prague summit.

These rounds of NATO enlargement **have redrawn Europe’s strategic map in profoundly positive ways**. For centuries, the states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were often treated as strategic pawns by Europe’s Great Powers and Russia. This Great Power competition resulted in hundreds of millions of broken lives through warfare, political killings, and deportations. NATO’s enlargements in 1999 and 2004 have virtually eliminated these dangers by anchoring these countries in the most successful political-military alliance in history and creating a secure space in which democracies are flourishing.

These enlargements would not have been possible without the **leadership and bold steps of successive US administrations**, which worked hard over time to secure bipartisan support in the Congress.

The **idea of a “Europe whole and free”** as a new mission for the NATO alliance was first declared by President George H. W. Bush in 1989.¹ This vision for new Europe, articulated at the time when Berlin Wall was still standing, laid the ideological groundwork for later opening of NATO. President Clinton put that vision into practice when in 1997 his administration launched the process of NATO enlargement and called for an “undivided, democratic Europe for the 21st century.”² When President George W. Bush made his first trip to Europe in June 2001, in a speech in Warsaw he articulated his belief in “NATO membership for all of Europe’s democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibilities that NATO brings,”³ thereby throwing his full weight behind the enlargement “from the Baltic to the Black Sea.” The whole enlargement process took place in an environment where it was neither inevitable nor predetermined. While many Allies initially had their doubts on the wisdom and extent of enlargement, the fact that US made it its strategic priority was instrumental in carrying the process to its successful conclusion⁴.

¹ “A Europe Whole and Free“, Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz. President George Bush, May 31, 1989. Available at <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>

² Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Report on the Enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 24, 1997, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton* (1997, Book I). Available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/PPP-1997-book1/PPP-1997-book1-doc-pg195-2/content-detail.html>

³ George W. Bush, Address at Warsaw University, June 15, 2001. Available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45973>

⁴ Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself For a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 290

Aims and strategic rationale of enlargement

NATO enlargement had both a strong moral imperative and clear strategic rationale. **Morally** the U.S. considered NATO enlargement essential to allowing the return of political freedom, economic prosperity, and human dignity to nations that had suffered from foreign domination and totalitarianism. It was a true expression of **value-based foreign policy**.

But leaving the moral aspect aside, there was also a **clear strategic rationale** behind NATO enlargement. The American view of this is best found in the October 1997 testimony of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “a larger NATO will make America safer, NATO stronger, and Europe more peaceful and united.”⁵ The same three key aspects were emphasized in the next enlargement round as well. In April 2003 Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossmann stated in front of the same Senate committee that “enlargement will strengthen democracy and stability in Europe, revitalize NATO, and benefit the United States.”⁶ What were the factors which guided this thinking?

First, there was **concern for European, and more particularly Central and Eastern European, security**. The region had historically been a source of many conflicts in Europe during the 20th century. It may sound distant now but after the end of the Cold War the area was widely described as a “security vacuum“ and even as “no man’s land”⁷. As could be seen from bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in many successor states of the former Soviet Union, the threat of whole region growing unstable and succumbing to violence was real. The Russian Federation, while initially relatively weak, renewed steps to try to reassert its influence on the countries that Moscow had dominated in the Soviet era. To develop into stable democracies, Central and Eastern European countries needed a strong security framework, one which only NATO could provide.

Second, NATO enlargement as a vital part of a broader strategy to help create a peaceful and democratic Europe was clearly in the **strategic interest of United States**. A stable and undivided Europe would remove one source of conflicts into which the US would be inevitably dragged⁸. At the same time, an enlarged NATO would enhance the overall transatlantic relationship. Enlargement was viewed part of the natural transformation and modernization of NATO as strategic alliance between US and Europe to defend common interests⁹.

⁵ Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, October 7, 1997, available at <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/971007.html>

⁶ Testimony of Marc Grossman, Under Secretary for Political Affairs before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, April 8, 2003, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/us/rm/19425.htm>

⁷ https://www.fas.org/man/eprint/aurora_29/part05.htm

⁸ Alison Mitchell, „Clinton, at West Point, Says Bigger NATO Lessens Chance of War”, New York Times, June 1, 1997, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/01/world/clinton-at-west-point-says-bigger-nato-lessens-chance-of-war.html>

⁹ Asmus, p 260.

Third, the enlargement took place in a period in which NATO was adapting to a new security environment, one marked by a variety of new challenges—including that of carrying out new missions beyond NATO's territory. In this context, then, the admittedly cliché but nevertheless true statement that “members should not be only consumers, but also producers of security” underscored the need—and for the US, the potential—for these states to **become effective contributors to the NATO alliance**. Such contributions have been seen by the new NATO members themselves as essential to the principle of collective security as enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, according to which an attack against one NATO member state is considered to be an attack against all NATO members.

Challenges to enlargement

Both rounds of enlargement also raised, to a varying degree, various counter-arguments to the accession of new members¹⁰. The opponents were **worried about the risks and costs** of the process. George F. Kennan, one of primary architects of Cold War containment policy, described it as “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era”¹¹.

In direct opposition to the view that enlargement would enhance European and regional security it was argued that accession of new members would be counterproductive as it would **seriously complicate NATO's relations with Russia**, possibly replicating the Cold War division of Europe, and thereby weakening the overall security of the Alliance. These fears were especially strongly expressed in the context of enlargement to the Baltic states, which broke new strategic ground because of their having been (forcibly) incorporated by Moscow into the USSR. It was argued that as there was no real security threat emanating from new Russia there was no immediate need to enlarge the alliance¹².

Instead of strengthening NATO, the accession of a number of small and medium-sized countries who were perceived to have little or no valuable assets for the Alliance as a whole was seen by the opponents as **threatening to dilute NATO's military and political effectiveness**. This would simply **further increase the burden on the United States** without providing any particular benefit. The net result would be US overextension and eventual disengagement from the transatlantic alliance. The popular columnist Thomas L. Friedman for example argued that there is “no way the US Army is going to guarantee Estonia-Russia border”. As a result NATO would cease to be a real military alliance and become a more like mini-UN¹³.

¹⁰ For more detailed arguments against enlargement see for instance Amos Perlmutter and Ted Galen Carpenter „NATO's Expensive Trip East: The Folly of Enlargement“, *Foreign Affairs*, 77:1 (January – February 1998); Michael E. Brown „Minimalist NATO: A Wise Alliance Knows When to Retrench“, *Foreign Affairs*, 78:3 (May-June 1999); Thomas L. Friedman „Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X“, *the New York Times*, May 2, 1998, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>.

¹¹ George F. Kennan „A Fateful Error“, *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, accessed at <http://web.archive.org/web/19970501051048/http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/gknato.htm>

¹² See for example Michael Mandelbaum „Expanding NATO is Unnecessary“, *Project Syndicate*, May 1, 1996, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/expanding-nato-is-unnecessary>

¹³ Thomas L. Friedman „Bye-bye NATO“, *the New York Times*, April 14, 1997, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/14/opinion/bye-bye-nato.html>

In the case of the Madrid round, the question of likely **enlargement costs** was also a matter of intense discussions, with speculative and confusing cost figures being widely thrown around. Some studies even estimated the costs to be more than 100 billion US dollars¹⁴. In the end these high additional costs never materialized and the whole question of costs soon disappeared from the enlargement debate. As a result it was not an issue at all in the context of next round of invitations issued in 2002.

Assessment of enlargement

NATO enlargement, coupled with the simultaneous enlargement of the EU, has **brought stability to Central and Eastern Europe**. It erased old dividing lines and moved this part of Europe beyond the instability that made the 20th century in the region so bloody. The prospect of membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions gave the countries an incentive to accelerate the pace of reforms and increase cooperation with their neighbors. As a result they were ready to assume full membership responsibilities without significant problems. The subsequent success of these nations, in turn, has continued to be a strong incentive for reform for other aspiring countries in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe—such as Albania and Croatia, which joined the Alliance in 2009, and the four current NATO aspirant countries.

The accession of Central and East European (CEE) countries to the NATO alliance has **removed important potential flashpoints from Western – Russian relations**. The stability in the region which has been ensured by NATO membership can only have been good for these relations. The enlargement was essential to stabilizing a post-Soviet Europe by eliminating strategic temptations for land-grabs by Russia and by expanding the zone of peaceful market democracies, which has benefited not only the citizens of those countries and their NATO Allies, but Russia as well.

At the same time membership of Central and Eastern European countries in NATO has provided these nations with **deterrence against the renewed Russian threat**. As the examples of Georgia and Ukraine show, countries bordering Russia which have remained in a security limbo have instead faced serious conflicts as Russia has attempted to reassert its influence in forceful ways. Had not NATO enlargement taken place we may have had to witness similar events closer to the heart of Europe. In that case by now many of CEE states might have fallen back into Russian sphere of influence and the geopolitical map of Europe would again start to resemble the Cold War era with similar dividing lines across the continent. By forming a sort of buffer between neo-imperialist Russia and the “Old Europe” the new states which joined NATO in 1999 and 2004 directly contribute to the security of other allies located to the West of them, like Germany.

While expanding Europe’s zone of peace and democracy, NATO enlargement has also **resulted in a more Atlanticist alliance** by bringing in pro-American nations which immediately became among the strongest allies of the United States. For example this manifested itself during the great Iraq policy dispute in 2003, when all Central and Eastern European countries supported the US position on the issue of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; moreover, all but one of them also later joined the coalition

¹⁴ Asmus, p. 271.

on the ground. The enlargements of NATO and the EU have been one of the key factors mitigating the impact of those voices in Europe that objected to US influence on the continent; the new member states have instead promoted the idea that the United States as a European power is a good thing. Even as Americans continue to resent the overall European unwillingness to contribute more to global security, a secure Europe is certainly not only a safer place in the world but also a better partner for United States in global affairs.

The countries that joined NATO have by their performance shown themselves to be **responsible alliance members** that share core Alliance values and basic principles. Enlargement has not crippled the decision-making and reaching of consensus in the NAC, despite the considerably larger number of countries around the Council table¹⁵. Instead the enlargement has enabled NATO to gain new allies in addressing a diverse range of traditional and new threats. All these nations have remained committed to respect for democratic standards and civil liberties, and are characterized by Freedom House as “free” countries¹⁶.

New members are helping NATO to grapple with new emerging challenges in many areas. For example, Poland and Czech Republic had agreed to host components of the US **missile defense** shield as planned during the Bush era. After changes to the US plans under President Obama, Poland and Romania are now scheduled to host US-owned elements of the NATO missile defense system. On the issue of tackling **cyber threats**, Estonia is performing a key and leading role in the Alliance: it hosts the relevant Center of Excellence, organizes various cyber activities and exercises for the Alliance, and contributes significantly to the necessary and ongoing work on cyber concepts and doctrine.

The countries have also taken commitments to work to **modernize and improve their military capabilities** in order to contribute to missions from stabilization operations to high-intensity military conflict. As a group mostly comprised of small countries, they lack large-scale forces, but have often brought some **specialized capabilities** to the table. All 10 countries are hosting or planning to host NATO Centers of Excellence, of which the most further developed thus far appear to be: the above-mentioned cyber defense center in Estonia, the CBRN center in the Czech Republic; and the military medicine center in Hungary.¹⁷ CEE countries also constitute a majority of the states contributing to major NATO **multinational capability development projects**. They represent 7 of the 12 member states of the Strategic Airlift Capability initiative (Hungary also hosts the C-17 fleet base) and 9 of the 15 participating states of the Allied Ground Surveillance system.

Showing their political will to defend NATO’s principles and collective security, the Central and Eastern European member states have been **active contributors to NATO and coalition operations**. According to a latest study by the European Defense Agency (EDA) of 20 European NATO nations and 6 additional non-NATO countries, in 2012 three countries within the region (Estonia with 7,1%, Slovenia with 6,0% and Czech Republic with 5,1%) were among the leaders regarding the actual share of troops a EDA country deployed to international operations. This

¹⁵ Karl-Heinz Kamp „NATO-Enlargement After the Riga Summit“ *Analysen und Argumente der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* 32/2006, available at http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9646-544-2-30.pdf?061122104910

¹⁶ See Freedom House report „Freedom in the World 2014“, available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2014#_UzAeptpDGUI

¹⁷ Information from http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_68372.htm

indicates that CEE nations are willing to send their troops on missions when called to do so, and thereby do their fair share of burden and risk sharing.

Participating in hazardous operations inevitably involves sacrifices. According to the available information¹⁸ eight CEE countries have suffered losses in Afghanistan, totaling 87 killed personnel (as of 22 April, 2014). In Iraq, during 2004-2007, seven countries in the region suffered an additional 50 fatalities. Moreover, Estonia has had one of the highest per-capita casualty rates among all nations participating in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan¹⁹.

Similarly, in response to President Obama's call in 2009 for a troop surge in Afghanistan, of the 10 CEE countries, all but two increased their participation numbers²⁰ and have sustained their contribution over the years together with other ISAF allies. Moreover, in the case of Operation Iraqi Freedom, a total of six Central and Eastern European countries sustained their force contributions in Iraq over the most difficult stages of the operation until 2008, with Estonia and Romania being among the four US allies which stayed into 2009²¹.

Of course there have also been **shortcomings** among CEE countries, especially regarding **defense expenditures**. On joining the Alliance, all these nations made varying commitments either to maintain defense spending at the NATO target level of 2% of GDP or to reach it within the next few years²². Estonia, however, was the only CEE country that has met the target since 2012; only one additional country, namely Poland, comes relatively close to this figure, with its 1.8% of GDP devoted to defense. For the remaining CEE allies, spending remains below 1.5 % of GDP²³. Many among them experienced the biggest relative drops among all member nations in defense budgets during the financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009, from which their spending has not recovered. This is clearly an area where the CEE states need to show rapid improvement if they want their security needs to be heard and if they are better to contribute to the Alliance's common efforts. Recent events in Ukraine seem to have resulted in a wider recognition of this need. For example Lithuania's politicians have reached a cross-party agreement on raising defense expenditures to meet the 2% target by 2020²⁴; similar plans have been developed in Latvia²⁵. There have also been calls for increase of defense spending in other countries of the region²⁶.

¹⁸ Website www.icasualties.org

¹⁹ Steve Coll „Burden sharing“, March 11, 2010, available at

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/stevecoll/2010/03/burden-sharing.html>

²⁰ Information from <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2009/sep/21/afghanistan-troop-numbers-nato-data?uni=Graphic:in%20body%20link>

²¹ Stephen A. Carney, *Allied Participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, (Center of Military History, United States Army, 2011). Available at <http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/059/59-3-1/index.html>

²² See for example Statement by Ian Brzezinski, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO Affairs, House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on Europe, April 29, 2003. Available at: http://www.dod.mil/dodge/olc/testimony_old/108_first.html

²³ Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence, NATO Public Diplomacy Division Press Release PR/CP(2014)028, published on 24 February, 2014.

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http://www.president.lt/en/press_center/press_releases/ensuring_national_security_is_a_commitment_to_the_lithuanian_people.html

²⁵ Richard Milne, *Baltic states pledge more defence spending as US presses allies*. Available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f5342e40-b5ae-11e3-81cb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2zc4iE7MA>

²⁶ Matthew Smith, *Romanian PM calls for defence spending increase*. Available at

<http://www.janes.com/article/36493/romanian-pm-calls-for-defence-spending-increase>

Conclusions and looking ahead

It is clear that both **enlargement rounds have contributed politically and militarily** to the Alliance and have been **strategically beneficial for the United States**. They have fostered historically unprecedented stability in the Central and Eastern Europe and across the continent; made NATO stronger and better able to protect its members and promote their security interests both in Europe and “out of area,”; and broadened burden-sharing within the Alliance.

The task of building a **Europe whole and free, however, is not complete**. Traditional **military threats to European security have not disappeared**. Instead Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which violates the entire system of post-Cold War international norms, has brought Europe to its most serious security crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and creates a sense of acute danger to the security of allies on the eastern borderlands of NATO—and beyond.

Thus, as we mark the anniversaries of historic eastern enlargements of NATO, **the need for a strong alliance capable of fulfilling its core task of collective defense is as great as ever**. The present crisis caused by Russia’s military actions, which are also aimed at testing NATO’s resolve, calls for Alliance’s steps to provide visible reassurance to its eastern members. Under current circumstances, with Russia having repudiated its commitment to uphold and protect Ukraine’s territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, it is time for NATO to consider repudiating its own pledge in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act to refrain from establishing permanent military bases in NATO newest members. This would bolster NATO’s defenses on its eastern flank and send an unequivocal signal to the regime in Moscow not to consider an act of aggression against any Alliance member. In the end, this is what NATO is all about.