The Many Paradoxes of NATO Enlargement

Johanna Granville


On March 12, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic formally became the newest members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The enlargement of NATO to 19 countries comes as the organization marks its fiftieth anniversary this April. It was only a year ago—on April 30, 1998—that the United States Senate ratified the Clinton administration’s decision to enlarge the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by a vote of 80 to 19. Proposed amendments that would have made NATO expansion more palatable to critics were defeated by large margins. With minimal debate in the Senate—and with seeming public indifference—one of the most far-reaching foreign policy decisions since the end of the cold war was thus made.

It is, of course, in America’s national interest to preserve peace and stability in Europe, a region that spawned two world wars in the last century. One of the most important international achievements of the past 50 years has been the creation in Western Europe of a security community whose members are committed to the assumption that resorting to war to settle their differences is unimaginable. NATO has been the framework for managing those security concerns. But in the post-cold war era, a new multinational organization is needed—one that can meet minimal security needs in a manner that avoids the renationalization of individual states’ defense policies. Expanding NATO to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic is not the answer. Indeed, the expansion of NATO can only have paradoxical consequences for NATO, its new members, and the security of Europe itself.

The Expansionists’ Arguments

The arguments in favor of NATO expansion are well known. President Bill Clinton claimed in February 1998 that expansion would “help to erase the cold war dividing line and contribute to our strategic goal of building an undivided, democratic, and peaceful Europe.” No doubt unintentionally, other expansionists advocate implicitly contradict this logic when they claim, as Charles Krauthammer did in the April 17, 1998, Washington Post, that “NATO expansion says to the world, and particularly to the Russians, that the future of Central Europe is settled. The no man’s land is no more. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are now securely part of the American-allied West.” For Krauthammer and other advocates, the “cold war dividing line” still exists; it has merely shifted eastward. NATO expansion is the natural extension of the cold war; it is not, as Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MI) stated loftily, the natural extension of the end of the cold war.

Expansionists argue that the unsettled state of Central Europe has been a territorial temptation to its great power neighbors throughout the twentieth century and a major cause of its wars. True perhaps, but is the formation of an alliance with these countries that shuts out Russia, the “loser” in the cold war, a valid solution? It is difficult to view Russia as the country that “lost” the cold war, because it was not militarily defeated in an actual shooting war and remains a nuclear power. Should ultranationalists or resurgent communists come to power in Russia, they could conceivably revive the credibility of their conventional and nuclear deterrent, perhaps in a decade. But this possibility only reinforces the anti-expansionist argument. By shutting out a country that retains the military capacity to cause harm (unlike Germany and Japan after World War II), NATO planners violate a key strategic principle, which is that one should never take on more enemies than necessary at any given moment.

Other expansionists claim that, in the light of Russia’s shaky progress since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Russia might
never become a truly democratic and capitalist sys-
tem. The country's economic crisis since August
1998 reinforces this skepticism. Still, other expa-
nansionists are haunted by the historical fear of Russian
and Soviet expansionism. They concede that Rus-
sia is weak today, but argue, as the Washington Post
did in an April 1997 editorial, that “the scant cur-
rent likelihood of an actual danger makes it smart
and cheap to buy the extra security insurance now.”
As consumers of automobile and homeowners
insurance know, expensive monthly payments can
be made to cover the cost of something that may
never occur; our essentially spends money out of
fear. In this case, however, the purchase of “extra
security insurance” can actually increase the risk
one is trying to insure against—a militant and
adversarial Russia.

**SPENDING CENTRAL EUROPE'S PEACE DIVIDEND**

Another paradox of NATO enlargement is that it
pressures Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Repub-
lic to increase military spending when they need to
focus on domestic economic reforms. These new
NATO members cannot rely on the United States
nuclear umbrella alone; they must achieve interoper-
bility with the militaries of the other NATO mem-
ber countries. Each new member must change its
method of selecting military personnel to attract
only high-quality candidates. In addition, they must
train these new recruits to master English and learn
the intricacies of NATO doctrine. They must estab-
lish a noncommissioned officer corps because NATO
planners believe that this will lead to a more effec-
tive military. They must also acquire command and
control systems that are compatible with NATO;
establish adequate air defense (which includes
NATO-compatible radar and communications sys-
tems as well as airplanes); and learn to work with
NATO at the planning level.

Despite the enthusiastic statements of their lead-
ers, none of these countries has done much to pre-
pare itself to meet NATO's standards (although
Poland has spent more on upgrading its military
than Hungary and the Czech Republic). Experts
estimate the total cost of modernization for all three
countries to be between $27 billion and $42 billion.

Expansion advocates claim that the costs of NATO
enlargement are still cheaper than those of a war.
Although this may be true in terms of lives saved,
it is not clear that expansion will be cheaper than
war when considering the type and duration of the
conflict, the armaments used, and the size of the
armed forces involved.

The costs of expansion raise another issue: What
became of the Central Europeans' “peace divi-
dend”? For nearly half a century the region was
forced to adhere to the Stalinist economic model,
with its emphasis on heavy industry and disdain
for the idea of comparative advantage. Now Central
Europe's leaders are elected officials, and the
region's people demand a higher standard of living
along with democratic reforms. These officials will
find it difficult to justify diverting precious funds
into the military sector, which has become unpopu-
lar. Many Central Europeans who voted in refer-
endums for NATO membership did so with the hope
that membership would attract Western investment
to their economies, not impoverish them. Clinton
himself has insisted that, in the long run, NATO
membership will tie Hungary, Poland, and the
Czech Republic to the emerging global economy of
democracies. While United States-financed repro-
duction projects may provide jobs for Central Euro-
pean citizens, they would benefit more if their
countries produced much-needed consumer goods
instead of unnecessary military equipment.

It has proved hard enough for countries such as
Germany, Greece, Turkey, and Spain to meet the
military standards of the United States and other
charter NATO members. Even now, according to
some analysts, these countries, admitted to the
alliance decades ago, are still playing a game of
catch-up—a game that the new members, with
their fledgling market economies, will find even
more difficult to play.

**WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTED**

Despite what was heard repeatedly in the United
States media, not all citizens in Poland, Hungary,
and the Czech Republic enthusiastically endorsed
NATO membership. Opinion polls showed that
members in the European Union were—indeed
remains—a more popular option. According to a
June 1997 poll by a Czech organization, support for
NATO membership among the Czechs was only 50.1
percent. However, a United States Information
Agency (USIA) public opinion poll conducted in the
Czech Republic a month earlier showed that 60
percent of the population supported membership.
Other USIA poll figures for May 1997 revealed that
57 percent of the Hungarian and 85 percent of the
Polish populations supported membership in NATO;
the lack of full public debate about the conse-
quences of admission, as well as general anti-
Russian sentiments, may account for the high
Polish numbers.
According to 1996 polls conducted by the USA, support in all three countries for NATO membership dropped off sharply when polifiers posed more specific questions. When asked if they would be willing to spend more money on their military in order to meet NATO standards, large majorities answered in the negative: in Poland by 74 to 16 percent; in Hungary by 87 to 9 percent; and in the Czech Republic by 89 to 11 percent.

Why then did 85 percent of voters endorse NATO in a November 16, 1997, referendum in Hungary? NATO officials, Western politicians, and the governments of the three prospective member countries pushed the vague idea that NATO membership would increase Western investment almost as a way to prevent citizens from probing the issue of membership more deeply. Moreover, the decision that Hungary should join NATO seems to have come from the top down, not the bottom up. According to an independent research organization, the Hungarian foreign and defense ministries paid for a “slick media campaign.” The Foreign Ministry itself spent more than $600,000 to present the issue in a manner favoring NATO membership. Those opposed to NATO membership lacked an organization and the funds to buy advertisements. As a result, many, if not most Hungarians who voted for membership had probably not fully weighed the costs and risks of membership.

More significant and disturbing, in 1997 Western military corporations (including Stahl/British Aerospace, Dassault Aviation, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and McDonnell Douglas) gave more than $1 million to pro-NATO organizations to purchase advertisements in Hungary that promoted NATO membership.¹ According to Hungary’s media laws, foreigners are noted to support political programs financially. The defense contractors thus intervened illegally in Hungarian politics.

Russia: NATO’s Friendly Enemy?

One of the major paradoxes of NATO expansion policy is its potentially negative impact on Russia. Alliances must have a purpose, and by definition must specify the adversary in advance; a distinct strategy is then devised to counter that threat. However, in November 1960, at the European Security Conference summit in Paris, the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet-led military alliance of Eastern European nations) and NATO signed the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty in which they declared an end to their mutual enmity today it is difficult to see how Washington could view Russia as a threat. Russia’s regular, general-purpose troops have shrunk from approximately 4 million in 1991 to 1.2 million in 1998. Many Russian officers have gone unpaid for up to five consecutive months and crime, hazing, and desertion are rampant in the ranks. It will take at least two decades for Russia to regain its military strength to the point at which it could once again threaten Eastern Europe and the United States—and then only by increasing the size of its military and improving the recruitment and retention of troops. Given the historical Russian, and later Soviet, fear of overland invasions and encirclement, the expansion of NATO closer to Russia’s borders was bound to create anxiety among Russians. They are alarmed that key Russian military facilities will now be within striking range of precision-guided conventional munitions delivered from newly acquired airfields in Central Europe. Verbal reassurances do not help, because Russian military planners—like United States defense planners—must gauge capabilities rather than intentions. This situation evokes the classic “security dilemma”: despite one nation’s defensive motives in raising an army or joining an alliance, its neighbors will always construe such actions to be potentially offensive in nature.

With the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to NATO the alliance’s border will move eastward by about 700 kilometers, greatly reducing the early warning time for the Russian armed forces in the face of a real or perceived attack.

¹The six largest American military contractors spent $51 million on lobbying to expand NATO between 1996 and 1998. In addition, some United States weapons manufacturers financed ethnic organizations in the United States that favor NATO expansion, such as the Polish-American Congress, the Hungarian-American Foundation, and the American Friends of the Czech Republic. The area manufacturers operated as an “active minority,” much like the National Rifle Association. Because of their persistent lobbying, they exerted more influence on Congress than the unorganized American public, which remained largely ignorant about the expansion policy. (In a 1997 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 53 percent of Americans supported expansion, but only 10 percent could name the three countries invited to join.)
from the West, NATO will also directly border the Russian territory at Kaliningrad, which is already isolated from the Russian mainland by independent Lithuania. Moreover, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic will give NATO about 13 divisions, 29 brigades, and 731 planes; they will also increase by 24 percent NATO’s battle tanks, by 22 percent its armored vehicles, and by 18 percent its artillery. Much of this Soviet-made equipment is obsolete and virtually useless; numbers should not be equated with value. However, NATO will also gain about 250 military air bases, 120 stationary antimissile complexes, and the entire logistical infrastructure of this new territory: 280,000 kilometers of roads, 44,000 kilometers of railroad track, and 5,200 kilometers of pipeline.

Without Central Europe as a buffer zone, the Russian government will most likely withhold key strategic and military information from Western policymakers. Secrecy will replace territory as a psychological buffer zone. The less security-related information the Russians provide to the West, the less vulnerable they will feel.

The Clinton administration has constructed various mechanisms to compensate Russia for NATO expansion. The Partnership for Peace program (PFP), which was launched in 1994, provides for intense military-to-military cooperation between NATO and former cold war enemies and neutrals (including Russia), and is considered a first step to NATO membership. The PFP allows Russian observers to be present at NATO exercises, and Russian military and diplomatic officials meet regularly with NATO leaders to review plans and operations. The NATO-Russia Partnership Council was also established in 1997 as a “venue for consultations, cooperation, and— wherever possible—consensus building between the Alliance and Russia.”

These mechanisms may be useful, but without binding guarantees that the West will not place nuclear weapons in and station troops on Central European territory, the Russians will probably not take these structures seriously and will pursue their own interests. As many Russian politicians point out, the West has already broken key verbal promises. They note that, in return for dismantling the Berlin Wall and allowing a reunified Germany to become a NATO member, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev believed that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had promised in mid-July 1990 not to allow former Warsaw Pact countries to join NATO.

NATO expansion has also reinforced Russian planners’ determination to revise their military doctrine, placing greater reliance on the country’s nuclear deterrent (as well as chemical and biological weapons) built to save money and to counter NATO’s conventional superiority in Europe. NATO expansion only reinforced a preexisting concern among many Soviet military planners about an overreliance on armor for defense. The first sign of this doctrinal shift appeared as early as 1993, when a new Russian military doctrine reversed a 1982 pledge never to use nuclear weapons first (although this pledge was mainly for propaganda purposes; Soviet military operations always had a strong nuclear component). Ivan Rybkin, former secretary of Russia’s Security Council, warned early in 1998 that “everyone must know that in the case of a direct challenge, our response will be fully fledged, and we are to choose...
the use of means. If an aggressor starts a war against us using conventional weapons, we may respond, with conventional forces.

This brings us full circle. NATO’s doctrine and strategy in the post–cold war era are based on dealing with a plethora of small-scale intrastate ethnic conflicts in which one cannot predict, or in some cases even identify, the adversary. Hence, instead of thousands of nuclear weapons to counter a massive conventional or nuclear attack from the Soviet Union, NATO will need rapid, mobile, and flexible conventional forces to deal with a spectrum of conflicts. How paradoxical, then, that in preparing for a nonnuclear attack, NATO planners risk provoking the Russian use of nuclear weapons.

**DOES IT ADD UP?**

A great deal of debate has centered on the costs of NATO enlargement policy. We have already seen how much the process may cost the new Central European members. However, the most recent United States military estimate for including Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in NATO comes to only $1.5 billion over the next 10 years, of which the United States will pay $900 million.²

The Defense Department estimate of $1.5 billion may sound like a bargain. However, the estimate is unrealistic, since it only considers the costs of admitting Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (previously a front-runner for initial inclusion). In reality, NATO’s “open door” policy could lead to 12 or more new members by 2010. This estimate also ignores three other factors: the probability that current European NATO members will not pay their fair share of expansion costs, the costs of multiple rounds of further expansion, and the hidden subsidies of the loans and grants already made by the Defense Department to the former socialist states. Assuming that NATO adds 12 or more members rather than just 3, the Congressional Budget Office’s top estimate of $1.23 billion for NATO expansion could easily quadruple to $500 billion or more. NATO “wannabes” are already jockeying for position, so this admission of still more members is not an abstract issue.

France and Germany have stated publicly that they will not spend a single extra franc or deutsche mark on NATO, whether it expands or not. British policymakers have implied that they might even spend less, since the new members will be adding to NATO’s coffers. With the Western European states unwilling to pay their share and the Central European states unable to do so, the United States portion of the NATO expansion bill could easily reach 50 percent of the total amount spent, not the official 15 percent estimate used by the American military.³

Moreover, the official Defense Department estimate of at least $1.5 billion is also seriously flawed because it omits the cost of the grants, loans, and military training expenditures involving potential NATO members. Between 1996 and 1998, the United States government authorized over $1.2 billion in grants and loans to support NATO expansion. This means that the United States has already been paying for NATO expansion since 1996. As World Policy Institute defense analyst William Hartung has noted, “The fact that the real cost of NATO expansion has already hit $1.2 billion just underscores the absurdity of the Pentagon’s estimate of only $1.3–$2 billion in total costs over the next twelve years.”

Did the 80 senators who voted for expansion really believe that the price for the United States would remain at $400 million? If so, it is puzzling that 76 of these senators voted down a proposal by Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) to put a spending cap of 25 percent on all costs of NATO enlargement, including United States subsidies extending beyond the “common costs” of NATO members. Why should a spending cap on American funding have frightened these senators unless they believed it might be exceeded?

**NATO: EXPAND AND DIE**

The idea to expand NATO arose perhaps more from the threat of extinction than from the need to counter a significant, identifiable adversary. NATO planners realized that if they did not find some larger reason to continue in this post–cold war era,
they might lose their jobs: “expand or die” was the slogan. But NATO may very well expand and die.

If, as a result of expanding its membership, NATO loses its credibility, then the alliance might well become extinct. How could NATO lose credibility? First, it might lose the political will to respond effectively to a nuclear attack or to solve a regional conflict, depending on the geographic location and legitimacy of the threat. Second, the alliance could lose its cohesion, either because of disgruntled charter members or disenfranchised new member countries. Or, third, the United States, having poured the most money into NATO, might become financially overextended.

As long as Russia and other countries are nuclear powers, deterrence—and thus credibility—will remain crucial in nuclear politics, even though the possibility of a deliberate nuclear attack now seems remote. However far-fetched or simplistic a scenario, would NATO retaliate if an ultranationalist clique in Russia launched a tactical nuclear weapon against Hungary 10 years from now? Would NATO have the political will to use nuclear weapons, knowing that this might lead to nuclear escalation with other nuclear powers? Or would NATO try some less violent method of retaliation and thereby lose credibility in the eyes of the aggressor? All it would take is one case of bluff calling for NATO to lose credibility.

A low-level regional conflict could threaten NATO’s credibility as effectively as a nuclear attack, and is more likely to occur. This can be seen in Bosnia and in the conflict in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Despite the Clinton administration’s rhetoric that NATO’s involvement in Bosnia has been a great success, the Bosnian crisis came close to splitting the alliance. But Bosnia—a sovereign nation—looks easy next to Kosovo, which as part of Serbia is an internal affair. (And the more Central European countries admitted into NATO, the greater the likelihood that NATO will encounter even more of these ethnic irredentist conflicts.) As Kosovo illustrates, NATO may have to wait until atrocities occur and a consensus is reached before it can intervene. As NATO expands, it may become more difficult to reach consensus, and NATO may become less flexible at precisely the time that the alliance set for itself the task of becoming more flexible, both in its decision making and in the speed of its deployment to conflict areas.

Finally, NATO’s credibility would be lost because of an exhaustion of United States funds and resources. Given the wildly unrealistic cost estimates endorsed by the Clinton administration and the Defense Department, this is a real possibility. Even a superpower’s resources are not infinite.

Security without NATO

Clearly, a security environment in Europe has changed. A European peacekeeping organization, perhaps a transformed EU or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that incorporated the security concerns of Central Europe, is a project that warrants greater discussion. The alternative is for the Central European states to “go it alone”—which implies a return to a policy of national self-help that could easily expose these states to greater risks from their neighbors and generate regional turmoil. Moreover, the Russians would probably appreciate an organization that made it more difficult for the armed forces of the Central European states to turn against one another and that obligated these states to maintain civilian control, publish their defense budgets, and conduct joint planning and training exercises. Any organization that offered the countries of Central Europe and Russia a framework for sharing information and clarifying capabilities and intentions—and therefore minimizing the chance of war—would clearly be a boon.

However, such an organization should not be NATO. Because it was originally established as an anti-Soviet military alliance, NATO has too many negative cold war associations for the Russians. Given the classic security dilemma, NATO statements of benign intentions will not suffice. Expanding NATO may represent a worthy attempt to improve the European security architecture. However, given its inherent paradoxes, NATO expansion is not in America’s—or Europe’s—best political, economic, and military interests.

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