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NATO Enlargement Reloaded

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## NATO Enlargement Reloaded

by Karl-Heinz Kamp<sup>1</sup>

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The dispute about *who* will become a new NATO member and *when* is set to make it back on the transatlantic agenda. Debates in the Alliance have for years been dominated by the operations in Afghanistan or the evolution of NATO's partnership approach, but now the enlargement question is coming up again and might lead to strong disagreements among the allies. All NATO nations certainly concur that the door for new members should remain open; the question is which countries should join the Alliance, and when?

At NATO's Chicago Summit in May 2012, US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton suggested that Chicago should be the last NATO summit not explicitly focusing on enlargement.<sup>2</sup> From this statement, which went largely unnoticed by the public, it can be logically inferred that *all* forthcoming summits should deal with inviting new members to join NATO, showing the degree of emphasis the US government is set to place on the enlargement issue in the coming years. Even if a statement of this kind in Chicago – in the midst of the presidential campaign and at the first NATO summit on US territory since 1999 – is partly directed to a domestic audience, it still shows the current mood in US political circles: NATO enlargement is regarded as a unique benefit, and the United States sees itself as the spearhead of the movement in favor of this.

With regard to most countries currently applying for NATO membership, the issue is hardly controversial within the Alliance.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> At the Atlantic Council meeting on May 21, Foreign Secretary Clinton stated: "... I believe this summit should be the last summit that is not an enlargement summit". See <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/05/190466.htm>

<sup>3</sup> In December 2011, NATO defined Georgia, FYROM, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina as "aspirant countries" and gave particular recognition to their interest in membership.



The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)<sup>4</sup> was ready to join NATO as early as 2009, together with Albania and Croatia. An almost bizarre dispute about the name of the country led Greece to veto FYROM's accession and keeps it still pending. Other allies, particularly the United States, are becoming increasingly impatient with the Greek obstructionism on this question. In March 2012, 54 members of the US Congress sent a letter to president Obama pressing for timely admission of FYROM. The FYROM case is thus more a procedural issue, and not a dispute on a "yes" or "no" to membership. The very moment Athens lifts its blockade, FYROM can become a member immediately.

Montenegro was admitted to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) in December 2009, and is said to have progressed significantly in meeting membership requirements since then. Bosnia-Herzegovina was invited to join the MAP in April 2010, albeit with certain conditions attached. According to those in favor of their accession, both these relatively small countries deserve an invitation to join NATO in the near future. This holds all the more true as their integration into Alliance structures would not pose insurmountable problems and, by contrast with such cases as the (former) application of Ukraine, should not stir up Russian protest.

The crunch point of the enlargement question, however, is Georgia, a country that was involved in a war with Russia and still has Russian occupation forces on its territory in the renegade regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2008, the George W. Bush administration was pushing strongly for Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO – in the case of Georgia, despite (or because of) its dispute with Russia – whereas Germany, France and many others were opposed to rapid admission of these two countries. The case was settled with a compromise, and hardly anything more has been done on it since then. Now, after a long, undeclared "cease-fire" within the Alliance over enlargement, the upcoming

revival of the debate is set to bring the Georgia issue to the fore again. However, the battle order has in the meantime apparently changed to a significant degree. In particular, informal discussions within the Alliance in mid-2012 showed that Washington heads a large majority of NATO members in favor of enlargement (including Georgia), whereas Germany and only a few others still strongly oppose such a step.

This paper evaluates what is at stake in the newly emerging enlargement debate. What are the pros and cons of Georgian NATO membership, and how should the Alliance proceed?

## Two Difficult Membership Applicants

The dispute over Georgian membership within NATO dates back to the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. Georgia was one of the first to sign NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994, and always justified its strong desire to join the Alliance with what it perceived as the threat emanating from Russia. In 2008, according to Georgian polls, 77% of the public supported a referendum on NATO membership. In the weeks prior to the summit, Georgia as well as Ukraine strengthened their demands for membership, the immediate goal being admission to the MAP. In NATO, there was a tacit consensus to keep the door for both countries open, but at the time it was felt that it was still premature to take them into the MAP.

At the summit, President George W. Bush surprisingly started touting again for rapid NATO membership for both countries. Many allies were highly skeptical with regard to the wisdom of such a step. Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe (after Russia), with a large pro-Russian population in its Eastern part and with particular historical significance for Moscow. Its integration into NATO did not seem feasible, and could have led to fierce Russian protest,

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<sup>4</sup> Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.



probably ending NATO-Russia cooperation once and for all. While Georgia would have been a much smaller bite to digest, it was already engaged in a long-smoldering conflict with Russia over its renegade regions (Russia had shot down a Georgian drone over Abkhazia). There was thus general concern that the escalation of the conflict could drag NATO into an Article 5 situation if Georgia were to become a NATO member.

In Bucharest, NATO reached consensus by not taking Georgia and Ukraine into the MAP, but giving both countries an explicit promise that they would be admitted to the Alliance. The Summit declaration stated: “We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO”,<sup>5</sup> without specifying a concrete date for admission. Another important step at this time was the foundation of the NATO-Georgia Commission, in addition to the already existing NATO-Russia Council and NATO-Ukraine Commission, in order to emphasize the special status of Georgia in comparison to other applicant countries.

In the short term this settlement appeased all sides – albeit with a price to pay, in that NATO gave up a core principle of its enlargement policy since the mid-1990s: taking in new members on an individual basis according to their merits, which have to be proved in a gradual and transparent process. The Bucharest statement, instead, gave a *guarantee* for membership (sooner or later), without referring to merits or prior achievements. This was one of the many “falls from grace” in the entire enlargement process – politically necessary at the time, but sowing the seeds for later trouble and inconsistencies.

Months later, in August 2008, the Russian-Georgian war started and was immediately used as grounds for arguing in favor of or against rapid NATO membership for Georgia. Those in favor argued that Moscow would not have dared wage military action

against Georgia if the country had already been a member of the Alliance. Opponents of Georgian membership pointed to the difficult situation for Alliance if one of its members were to be involved in a war with Russia.

In the meantime, the other “difficult” NATO applicant (Ukraine) indicated that it was no longer interested in speedy admission to the Alliance. In June 2010 the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law declaring that the country would pursue a non-bloc policy, i.e. it would not participate in political-military alliances but would further develop its partnership with NATO from a non-aligned position.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it is Georgia which remains the major stumbling block in the upcoming enlargement debate.

### The Roots of the Debate

Since the end of the East-West conflict, the question of whether or not to accept new members in NATO has been highly disputed. Supporters at the time pointed to the benefits new members could bring to NATO, while skeptics warned against the repercussions on the relationship with Russia or pointed to the difficulties of finding consensus in an ever-growing Atlantic Alliance. Particularly in Germany, one of the driving forces in the first enlargement round after the Cold War, some wanted to limit the enlargement process to a very small number of states: the argument for this was that NATO should prove its capability to enlarge, but should neither overstretch its capacity to integrate new members nor fuel Russian concerns about a constantly growing Alliance. By this logic it was thought that Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic should be admitted, whereas the Baltic States - sharing common borders with Russia - should be kept out for as long as possible.

This approach quickly proved to be illusory, since

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm)

<sup>6</sup> <http://euobserver.com/13/30212>



more and more countries applied. NATO therefore needed criteria by which to assess the growing number of candidates. What should be the merits and achievements according to which a membership application should be granted? Unfortunately, the need for clear membership benchmarks was at odds with NATO's traditional reluctance to have its freedom of action limited by fixed and formal standards. NATO allies understandably did not want to find themselves in a situation where they had to accept an applicant country which fulfilled all the given norms and conditions but was not appreciated for other political reasons.

In addition, despite the overall consensus that NATO should pursue an open door policy, the motives of single NATO members for supporting individual applicant countries differed and evolved over time. Some NATO nations backed candidates in their immediate vicinity, in order to stabilize their neighbourhood. Others voted for aspirants in consideration of long-standing historical or cultural ties. Some supported countries which were not controversial from a Russian point of view, while others were in favor of applications from countries which were contentious for Moscow.

As a result, NATO conducted the entire enlargement process in a slightly twisted manner. In its Enlargement Study of September 1995, the Alliance defined a number of specific and transparent criteria for applicants to fulfil with a view to becoming members (and also to comply with after joining the Alliance). At the same time, decision-making processes in the three enlargement rounds since the end of the Cold War (1999, 2004, 2009) were strongly affected by political considerations which went beyond this set of rules and regulations. As a result, not all of the new members were fully in line with what the Enlargement Study stipulated, namely that enlargement should be a benefit not only for the admitted countries but also for the efficiency of

NATO itself. Some of the 12 countries which have become members since 1999 swiftly neglected the promises they made prior to accession (like keeping their level of defense spending at 2% of Gross Domestic Product), and contribute appallingly little to NATO's overall capabilities. Others show worrisome levels of corruption and nepotism, which could even harm NATO's security standards – particularly with respect to classified information.

If the forthcoming NATO summits will all have to deal with the membership question and bring the enlargement debate into the limelight, then there is bound to be further discussion of benchmarks and criteria. The Enlargement Study of 1995 can still function as a guiding document. However, given the experiences of the past, it is likely that NATO's decisions on enlargement will (again) not be taken solely on the basis of objective principles, but also according to political preferences or individual perceptions.

### Russia and Enlargement

During the almost twenty years of the enlargement process<sup>7</sup>, Russia has vehemently opposed NATO admitting new members from the former Eastern hemisphere. For Moscow, NATO "expansion", as the Russians call it, is always a zero sum game: any new member for NATO means a loss of influence or power for Russia. This holds all the more true as, from Moscow's point of view, NATO is an institution which should in any case no longer exist. Russian reactions, particularly from military representatives, have at times been almost hysterical, with threats of military action against NATO (even nuclear strikes) in the event of membership being granted to, for instance, the Baltic States. It is safe to assume that such panic-stricken outbursts were in line with the political leadership in the Kremlin - a NATO General threatening the use of nuclear weapons

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the enlargement process began with the speech of German Defense Minister Volker Ruehe at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in March 1993.





against Russia would be fired within minutes. The idea that NATO enlargement de facto stabilized Russia's Western neighbourhood, which might otherwise have been exposed to regional crises, was never openly acknowledged by Russian military or political decision-making circles.

NATO, instead, emphasized its respect for Moscow's legitimate security interests. However, the Alliance never accepted any Russian veto against a country applying for membership. NATO was never actively campaigning for new members, but respected the desire of sovereign states to choose the alliance they want to belong to. Still, despite NATO's guiding principle of an open door policy toward potential new members, there were always different opinions within the Alliance as to how far Russian concerns should be taken into account. The position of core allies has, indeed, shifted considerably in this respect. When Germany brought up the idea of enlargement in 1993 the then US administration opposed any such proposal, not least because Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot strongly argued in favor of a "Russia first" policy. In autumn 1994 the Clinton administration reversed its stance on membership, not least for domestic reasons (midterm elections), and became the prime supporter of enlargement. By the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the relative positions of the US and Germany had come full circle: the Bush administration was pushing for a membership signal to Ukraine and Georgia (not least as an anti-Russian move), whereas Germany led the group of those opposing this line so as not to alienate Russia.

A re-emerging debate on enlargement will certainly reawaken Russian protests and lead to open military threats, particularly if it comes to Georgia. How sensitive the issue still is for Russia can be seen in the then President Medvedev's November 2011

statement that one purpose served by the war with Georgia was that of stopping NATO enlargement in the region.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the continuing tendency to express military threats in response to unwelcome developments in NATO is seen in the May 2012 statement of the Russian Chief by the General Staff, General Makarov, regarding the use of preemptive strikes against NATO missile defense sites.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite Russian disapproval of future enlargement, Moscow's foreseeable threats will arguably ring hollow. On the international scene – and not only in the Middle East – Russia has lost much of its former influence. It is no coincidence that, in the recent Pentagon paper on US defense priorities for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia is mentioned with only one generic sentence.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, with regard to its economic, military and societal modernization, Russia has lost ground and is currently occupying an international position that lends no support to its pretensions of being at eye level with NATO. Russian resistance will keep NATO neither from building up a missile defense capability nor from inviting countries to join the Alliance if all 28 NATO nations approve.

At the same time, a future NATO member state which has Russian troops on its soil and is involved in an ongoing dispute with Moscow about the status of occupied territories would provide Moscow with a lever to negatively influence NATO's cohesion.

### Georgia in NATO – Pros and Cons

A standard argument brought forward in favor of Georgian NATO membership is that of "unfinished business". While NATO leaders have constantly repeated their vision of a *Europe whole and free*, it seems

<sup>8</sup> Denis Dyomkin, Russia Says Georgia War Stopped NATO Expansion, Reuters, 21 Nov. 2011

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/04/world/europe/russian-general-threatens-pre-emptive-attacks-on-missile-defense-sites.html>

<sup>10</sup> "In addition, our engagement with Russia remains important, and we will continue to build a closer relationship in areas of mutual interest and encourage it to be a contributor across a broad range of issues." Department of Defense, Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense, Washington D.C. January 2012.



obvious that the previous three enlargement rounds have omitted parts of Europe. To date, this claim has been brought forward mostly with reference to the Western Balkans, where some countries have already joined the Alliance in recent years whereas others like Bosnia-Herzegovina or Montenegro are still awaiting an invitation. Accepting these countries as members would mean – according to supporters of enlargement – exporting stability to the region via the Alliance’s unspoken code of conduct. Since NATO even went to war in 1999 to support stability in the Balkans, it seems obvious that it feels a particular responsibility for this part of Europe.

Initially, Georgia was not included in the “unfinished business” reasoning, as there was actually a dispute over whether the country even belongs geographically to Europe at all (Article 10 of the Washington Treaty makes provision for NATO membership only for European and North American countries). Since NATO’s Bucharest declaration guaranteeing Georgian membership, however, Georgia has been seen as a part of Europe (if not geographically, then certainly politically) and needs to be taken into the Alliance sooner or later. It is therefore hard to deny that the question of inviting Georgia to join is, indeed, part and parcel of the unfinished business.

A second argument brought forward in favor of Georgian membership is that the country has proved its readiness to contribute to NATO operations. In Afghanistan, Georgia has been one of the largest force providers in relation to the size of the country, and has suffered casualties. Even if Georgian soldiers received significant support in terms of equipment (to a large degree provided by Germany), providing more forces than some of NATO’s full members has been a noteworthy achievement. Given the international financial crisis and the expected budget cuts in all NATO countries, supporters of enlargement point to new members as a way of improving the Alliance’s overall capabilities. In this respect, Georgia’s relatively positive economic development offers solid grounds for seeing the country as a net provider of security, both with its current partner status and once it joins NATO.

On the negative side, two points seem crucial. First, complaints that the Chicago Summit made no progress with regard to the enlargement issue – something which also seems implicit in the statement of Secretary Clinton on NATO’s future summit agendas – need to be assessed critically. NATO enlargement is not a value in itself, and it is not the core function of the Alliance to admit new members. Instead, enlargement *can* strengthen NATO and should therefore occur only if it is a win-win situation for the applicants as well as for the Alliance. This does not necessarily mean that Georgian membership would not be good, but at the same time countries should not be invited with the sole purpose of keeping the enlargement process going. A *Europe whole and free* is certainly NATO’s long-term vision for the continent, but this does not imply that all European states must necessarily be members of the Alliance. In that sense, the 1995 Enlargement Study with its clear statements on the benefits enlargement has to bring for NATO is still seminal.

Second, it is not so much Russian dissent that requires caution in the enlargement question. Russia’s protest will come by default, and cannot be the yardstick for NATO’s decision-making on new members. The real underlying problem is that the territorial disputes between Russia and Georgia over the two renegade regions could lead to another war in the region. A military conflict between Russia and a Georgia with NATO member status would most likely lead to an Article 5 situation in which NATO would have to support Georgia and could find itself in a war with Russia. How credible would NATO’s Article 5 commitment be under such circumstances? There are even concerns that a future Georgian leadership could feel tempted to behave more offensively vis-à-vis Moscow, knowing that in a conflict it would be backed by the North Atlantic Alliance. Admittedly, this “mourir pour...?” question was always present during the entire enlargement process: would 28 NATO members be prepared to go to war with Russia to protect, say, Tallinn or Riga? With regard to the credibility of US nuclear commitments for Europe, it was even relevant for the “old” NATO



members throughout the Cold War: would the United States endanger San Francisco (by exposing it to Soviet nuclear retaliation) to protect Frankfurt, Amsterdam or Rome? Questions such as these can never be answered in advance, and will always depend on circumstances and on the specific situation. One can leave it to future debate to determine whether the lukewarm reaction of many NATO allies during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war makes it possible to draw any conclusions in this respect.

For good reasons, the Enlargement Study stipulates, in Article 6 of the document, that applicants with territorial disputes or irredentist claims need to settle them by peaceful means before they can join NATO. Also important is the more general provision in Article 10 of NATO's founding document, the Washington Treaty of 1949, to the effect that aspiring member states should be in a position "... to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area...". In this respect, inviting Georgia to join before its territorial disputes are solved could import instability into NATO, rather than improve the overall performance of the Alliance.

Some supporters of rapid Georgian admission argue that NATO broke the principle of not importing territorial disputes even in its earliest history: in 1955 Germany was invited to join the Alliance, notwithstanding the fact that more than a third of its territory was occupied by the Soviet Union and that the communist "German Democratic Republic" was internationally recognized only by a few states in the Eastern hemisphere. However, the overall situation at the beginning of the Cold War was fundamentally different and cannot be compared to the Georgian-Russian disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### **How to Deal With the Membership Question?**

It can thus be seen that the four aspirant countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYROM, Georgia and Montenegro) cannot be treated as a homogenous group, but require individual approaches regarding their accession to NATO.

FYROM already has the support of all NATO members except Greece, which is still blocking its admission. In December 2011 the International Court of Justice ruled 15:1 (the Greek judge being the sole dissenter) that Greece was wrong in blocking FYROM's accession to NATO at the Bucharest summit in 2008. It remains to be seen whether key allies like the United States will increase pressure on Athens to lift its blockade so that FYROM can join the Alliance, as it was initially scheduled to do in 2009.

With regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, the application process is far advanced as the two countries are part of the MAP. Subject to sufficient steps being taken in terms of reform and preparation for membership, the ball will be in NATO's court to offer membership to both countries. Whether this could happen as early as the next NATO summit, which is likely to take place in 2014, will depend on consensus-building among the 28 Alliance members.

Georgia is a different case. After the membership guarantee given by NATO in Bucharest, the question is no longer whether Georgia will be admitted, but when. At the same time, Georgia is not yet part of the MAP, which is regarded (albeit with no formal statement to this effect) as a precondition for membership. The US in particular has been arguing that membership preparation could also be done within the NATO-Georgia Commission, omitting the time-consuming MAP process. Such a proposal, though, has precarious implications. The MAP not only prepares applicants for membership; by virtue of its unlimited time frame, it provides NATO with the necessary flexibility in decision-making on enlargement. Albania, for instance, joined the MAP in 1999 and maintained this status for ten years until it joined the Alliance in 2009. In other cases, the MAP phase was significantly shorter – according to the condition of the applicant state and the requirements of the overall political situation. Bypassing the MAP in the Georgian case would (again) create a precedent vis-à-vis other applicants, with potential negative implications in the long term. It would also





deprive NATO of the possibility to assess continuing development of the Georgia-Russia relationship and to bridge the different positions within the Alliance on Georgia's membership.

To move the enlargement issue significantly forward, but at the same time to take note of the special implications of a Georgian membership, the next summit should include Georgia in the MAP process. This would be a visible step ahead for Georgia, and it would be in line with NATO's previous procedures for admission. Moreover, such a step would provide NATO with breathing space for consensus-building.

NATO could also consider updating the 1995 Enlargement Study. Even if this document is still fundamental, a revision (including an appraisal of the membership policy NATO has pursued for almost two decades) might be useful.

An open door policy remains a core element of NATO's overall strategy for a *Europe whole and free*. However, enlargement does not need to follow what some in the European Union call the "bicycle theory", according to which it has to constantly move forward so as not to fall over. Instead, enlargement is an individual process which must certainly be pursued without external vetoes. At the same time, this does not imply that each and every membership application will progress to an automatic, foregone conclusion.