

Terrorism Must Not Stop NATO Expansion

By Stanley Sloan and Heiko Borchert

Some weeks after the terrible terrorist attacks on American soil and on two of the world's most powerful symbols of economic and military power, the world is still trying to adjust to these traumatic events and their consequences. The Bush administration, despite internal differences about the ultimate aims of its response, has launched a broadly based diplomatic and military campaign aimed at fighting the terrorists and countries that harbor them

How will the war against terrorism affect the pursuit of NATO enlargement? Even before the September 11 events political interest in and support for NATO's second enlargement round could not be compared to that for the first round, which brought the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into the alliance. President Bush has said that his administration is a strong supporter of NATO enlargement. But the administration has no eager European partner on this issue. Germany, the key European architect of the first round, has less of a strategic stake in the next stages and is reluctant to upset Moscow.

Now, the terrorist attacks on the United States and their aftermath could create additional obstacles. The demanding and necessary campaign against terror will pull resources and political attention away from other issues, including NATO enlargement.

This coincides with a domestic European agenda that is not very favorable to NATO's enlargement process. European Union governments are increasingly preoccupied by the scheduled launch of the EU's common currency on January 1, 2002. Important European countries such as France and Germany are about to go through presidential and governmental elections, respectively.

US relations with Moscow also could play an important role. Russian officials have declared that the country would not provide military help for Bush's anti-terror coalition, but Moscow seems prepared to provide at least political and intelligence support. Some experts have argued that Russia might want to request favors in return for its support against terrorism. Delaying or abandoning plans to bring the Baltic states into NATO could be such a favor. Neither the United States nor European governments should be tempted by this option.

Launched in the early 1990s, NATO enlargement aims at stabilizing Europe and at furthering the spread of democracy in former Warsaw Pact countries. Together with the EU's admission of new members, expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions has been a key part of the strategy aimed at extending the benefits of democracy, economic prosperity, and international multilateral cooperation to a region cut off from such opportunities for over 50 years. More than ten years after the fall of the iron curtain, the basic rationale for this strategy has not changed.

How, then, should the allies proceed? Ten countries currently seek membership in NATO. Judged by the standards set in NATO's 1995 Study on Enlargement, some of these countries could be considered close to qualifying for an invitation. They include Slovenia, Slovakia and the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Two candidates, Romania and Bulgaria, could be strategic assets to the alliance and presumably will get invitations further down the road. The other candidates, Albania, Macedonia and Croatia are even less prepared to begin formal negotiations.

The "objective" criteria of the NATO Study on Enlargement clearly should serve as the first

hurdle. Only those countries that have made significant progress in developing their democratic institutions, establishing free market economic systems, and moving their military systems toward NATO standards should be on the next list of invitations.

Second, although there should be no formal link between NATO and European Union enlargement, the fact is that every EU member is effectively part of the Western security system that is organized around NATO. It is no coincidence that countries that are closest to EU membership are either NATO members already (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) or are strong candidates for NATO membership (like Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Baltic states). In some European capitals this reasoning has given rise to the idea of delaying the Baltic states' accession to NATO in favor of a quick admission to the EU coupled with an implicit defense guarantee. However, as the EU is not yet able to issue convincing defense guarantees, this approach is not a compelling alternative to moving both enlargement processes ahead.

Third, even though Russia should not be accorded a say over which country can or cannot join NATO, it is in the interest of NATO members to try to involve Moscow constructively in the campaign against terrorism and to strengthen links between Russia and NATO. NATO should offer to open discussions with Moscow about the technical issues associated with Baltic membership in the alliance, like how to deal with the Kaliningrad enclave, Russian territory between Poland and Lithuania that would be surrounded by NATO (and EU) territory in the future. The allies should also make clear that NATO membership for Russia is not excluded, and that, if Russia were interested, it would be judged on terms similar to those applying to other candidate states.

Finally, the NATO allies in Prague next year should declare that all 10 candidates can expect to receive invitations to begin formal negotiations with the alliance as they meet the standards set in the NATO Study on Enlargement. As a recent NATO Parliamentary Assembly report has suggested, the enlargement process should be converted from one of "waves" to a "stream" of invitations. To buy some time to work through the Baltic issues, Slovenia and Slovakia should be invited to begin formal negotiations in 2003 with the Baltic states beginning such talks in 2004.

Does such an approach have a chance of moving enlargement ahead? The answer to this question begins in Washington and ends in Europe. Only if the Bush administration decides to move enlargement ahead, in spite of all obstacles, is there any chance of invitations being issued in Prague. However, only if the European allies are convinced of the wisdom of continued enlargement will the Bush administration be able to get the full consensus required for even one formal invitation. After the first hour of fine political rhetoric, Europeans must deliver. Extending NATO to the East will in the long run strengthen the alliance's European pillar as well as the transatlantic link. A commitment in Prague is thus in Europe's interest and should receive concrete backing.

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