

OPINION



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PRO-CON

Should the US push to expand NATO?



AP Photo/Mindaugas Kulbis

German NATO soldiers train in 2018 near Vilnius, Lithuania. The U.S.-led military exercise involved 18,000 soldiers from 19 countries.

PRO: America – and Europe – need a bigger NATO to stymie Russia's ambitions

WASHINGTON — Europe needs NATO. America needs NATO. You know who else needs NATO? Vladimir Putin.

The Russian leader has long used the existence of NATO to justify his antagonism toward the West.

Moscow's aggressiveness, you see, is merely a response to the "threat" NATO poses to Russian security. It's malarkey, of course — like a burglar claiming it's your fault he robbed your house because you had the audacity to buy a new TV.

Unlike Putin's Russia, NATO poses no threat of aggression. It is and always has been a purely defensive alliance. Even at the height of the Cold War, NATO harbored no designs on Soviet Russia and its satellites.

And once the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union crumbled without a shot being fired, NATO welcomed new members to the alliance — contributing further to the mutual security of all and the expansion of freedom and democracy in Europe.

NATO and the new Russia lived peacefully side-by-side for years, until Putin embraced the fiction that, by increasing its membership, NATO was somehow encroaching on Russia and threatening its security.

Inside and outside the alliance, no one wants to pick a fight with Russia. Yet Putin's aggressiveness — from his invasions of Georgia and Crimea to his militarism in Ukraine — has made joining the alliance even more attractive.

And it's not just nations who've already taken casualties who seek membership.

In addition to Georgia and Ukraine, Finland and Macedonia are knocking on NATO's door, membership applications in hand. These countries and more rightly see NATO as a counter to Russia's destabilizing adventurism.

No wonder Putin wants NATO to stop expanding. It crimps his style.

There is zero likelihood that Putin would stop harassing the alliance if NATO stopped taking in new members. Much like the czars of old, he wants a hard sphere of influence over Europe — something pos-

sible only if Moscow can break up NATO and decouple the U.S. from Europe.

And there is good reason for NATO to keep adding willing nations to its ranks.

In a defensive alliance, geography matters. A coherent frontier that keeps the bad guy further and further away is a good thing. Putin isn't going away anytime soon, so NATO must consider the geography of defending its eastern flank for the foreseeable future.

Freedom matters, too. Denying willing nations the right to participate in collective defense would only restrict freedom. Nor does it make any sense to discourage aspirant nations from meeting the political-military standards to qualify for NATO membership.

Know what doesn't matter? Size. Many small states that have entered NATO have been net contributors to security. They have hit or are on track to hit the agreed-upon NATO defense spending targets. They participate in NATO missions. In terms of manpower and operational contributions, they kick in more than they take out — easily outperforming many much bigger countries on a pound-for-pound basis.

Tiny Estonia is a case in point. It easily meets NATO's annual defense spending target of 2 percent of GDP.

Meanwhile, big, rich Germany struggles to do devote more than 1 percent of its GDP to defense; its finance minister recently proposed a budget that would actually reduce defense spending after 2020.

Today, Macedonia is poised to join the alliance. But the prospects of more nations joining the club anytime soon are dim.

Yet, NATO's open door policy is more than symbolism. It represents what NATO is: an alliance of free nation-states committed to mutual defense cooperation. As long as there are rulers like Putin, the need for that kind of commitment will not diminish.

Putin knows that. He fears that. It restrains him. This is no time for NATO to remove that restraint.

James Jay Carafano directs the Heritage Foundation think-tank's research into matters of national security and foreign relations.



James Carafano

CON: If US succeeds in expanding NATO, it would set stage for another Cold War

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is not a rational step if the aim is to blunt the ambitions of the government of Russia.

The first fallacy is the premise that Russia has ambitions that need to be blunted.

Despite claims by some that Russia under President Vladimir Putin is trying to reconstitute the Soviet Union in the territory it held before 1991, Russia has been modest in its aims.

The only territories in which it has indicated expansionist tendencies have been territories that were closely linked to Russia historically.

The Crimean Peninsula never had any connection to Ukraine prior to 1954, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, for reasons that have never been clear, decided to switch it from the Russian component of the Soviet Union to the Ukrainian component.

Crimea had been part of Russia since the late 18th century, and Crimea's population was and is predominantly Russian, not Ukrainian.

Even Russia's promotion of separatists in eastern Ukraine is a step that reflects historical links, because in that sector, the population is mixed Ukrainian and Russian.

The Ukraine government had refused pleas for local autonomy from the population of eastern Ukraine, setting the stage for a push for separation.

Even if I am wrong about all that — even if Russia does harbor broad territorial ambitions — expanding NATO is not a rational policy.

Expanding NATO encourages Russia to be defensive and to feel the need to protect itself. In 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland out of fear that Nazi Germany might make a move into Finland.

To date, NATO has expanded significantly into Eastern Europe, creating in the Kremlin the same jitters it felt in 1939.

NATO has brought into membership a number of former Russian allies — Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, East Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Montenegro and Romania.

Even more problematic for Russia, NATO has accepted three countries that were part of the Soviet Union — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

These expansions set relations between Russia and the West on a downward spiral, following a time after the demise of the Soviet Union when it seemed that the relationship might be friendly.

The West — and specifically the United States — assured Russia that the weakened posture of Russia would not be exploited to expand NATO. But then NATO accepted one Eastern European country after another into its treaty, which dates from 1949. Russia considered the West duplicitous.

The United States should not make the situation even worse by promoting NATO membership for more of Russia's western neighbors.

Despite the influx, NATO still does not count as members Ukraine, Serbia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Macedonia and Bosnia.

NATO's expansion has brought a dangerous polarization in east-west relations and has increased militarization on both sides.

President Donald Trump wants new aircraft carriers and upgraded nuclear weapons. He browbeats Western Europe to spend more on its military.

Last year Putin test-launched a supersonic missile that he says can penetrate existing U.S. missile defenses. An arms race is not in the interests of either country.

John B. Quigley is a professor at Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law and a leading scholar on U.S. relations with Russia.



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