

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4701 | MAY 5, 2017

Brussels Mini-Summit: Keeping NATO Enlargement on the Table

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At the May meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the heads-of-state level in Brussels (commonly referred to as a NATO mini-summit), the Alliance must send a clear message that its “open-door” policy remains firmly in place. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has underpinned Europe and North America’s security for nearly 70 years, so it is no surprise that many countries in the transatlantic region that are not already members want to join the Alliance. NATO’s open-door policy has been a crucial driver of modernization and reform in candidate countries, has promoted stability and peace in Europe, and has made it easier for the Alliance to coalesce around collective defense. The U.S. should continue to promote NATO’s open-door policy.

The Enlargement Process

NATO’s open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, helping to ensure the Alliance’s central place as the prime guarantor of security in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 10 states that any European State that is “in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area”¹ can be invited to join the Alliance.

Montenegro is expected to join the Alliance as its 29th member state in May. This leaves three official candidate countries to join NATO at a future date: the Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia.

While Russia has described any further NATO enlargement as a “provocation,”² no third party should have a veto over the decision of the sovereign member states of NATO. Rather, it is for the democratic countries that make up the Alliance to decide on whether to admit new members. All decisions made by the Alliance require unanimity, including those regarding enlargement.

Georgia

Georgia was promised eventual membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Since then, not all members of the Alliance have been supportive. This is especially true of France and Germany, who blocked Georgia from receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP).³ After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent occupation of 20 percent of Georgia’s territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast with its support for overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and Africa. Perhaps Georgia’s greatest contribution is found in Afghanistan.

Even though Georgia has not received a MAP, it has a relationship with NATO that far exceeds the traditional MAP. The relationship includes the Annual National Program, the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package agreed to at the 2014 Wales Summit. Includ-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4701>

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ed in this package is the NATO–Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), inaugurated in August 2015. NATO reaffirmed its commitment to Georgia at the 2016 Warsaw Summit.

The Republic of Macedonia

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Macedonia became an independent state under its new constitutional name: Republic of Macedonia. Greece quickly protested on the baseless grounds that the name Macedonia, which is the same as that of Greece’s northern province, implied regional territorial claims by the new nation.

In 1993, Macedonia joined the United Nations under the provisional name “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.” In 1995, Macedonia and Greece agreed to a U.N.-brokered interim accord in which Athens agreed not to block Macedonia’s integration into international organizations, such as NATO, so long as it called itself “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” until both sides agreed on a mutually acceptable name.

Macedonia joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1995 and received a MAP in 1999. Upon completing its MAP in 2008—meaning it had met all requirements for joining the Alliance—Macedonia anticipated an invitation to join that year at the NATO summit in Bucharest. At the last minute, Greece unilaterally vetoed Macedonia’s accession over the name issue. In December 2011, the International Court of Justice ruled that Greece’s veto was in blatant violation of the 1995 interim accord. Even so, Greece continues to block Macedonia’s membership.

The decades-long wait for membership is having a negative impact on Macedonian politics, creating space for pernicious actors like Russia to exploit NATO’s inability to fulfill its promise to Macedonia. In addition, the permanent state of limbo in which Macedonia has operated is in part responsible for

fostering an increasingly toxic domestic political environment, which further hampers the country’s chances of gaining eventual membership.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In April 2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina stated its desire to join NATO, and the country was offered its MAP in 2010. Bosnia and Herzegovina has made some progress in defense reform and has even deployed troops to Afghanistan, but the country is still far off from joining the Alliance.

In order to become a NATO member, Bosnia and Herzegovina must first register all immovable defense properties as state property for use by the country’s defense ministry. Little progress on this has been made. On a visit to Sarajevo in February, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that “NATO stands ready to activate your Membership Action Plan, once all immovable defence properties have been registered to the state. We welcome the reforms that you are making in the defence and security sector.”⁴

An additional challenge is the internal politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which makes NATO membership controversial. This is especially true in the ethnically Serb region, Republika Srpska, one of two sub-state entities inside Bosnia and Herzegovina that emerged from that country’s civil war in the 1990s.

Ukraine’s Relations with NATO

Even though NATO stated in 2008 that someday Ukraine would be invited to join the Alliance, until recently, the Ukrainians made little effort to help make this invitation a reality.

Once an aspiring NATO ally under the leadership of President Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine’s previous pro-Russia government under President Viktor Yanukovich blocked membership progress. In 2010,

1. The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 10, April 4, 1949, last updated March 21, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm (accessed January 10, 2017).

2. “NATO’s Planned Balkan Expansion a ‘Provocation’: Russia’s Lavrov,” Reuters, September 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-idUSKCN0HO11W20140929> (accessed January 11, 2017).

3. Judy Dempsey, “NATO and the E.U. Desert Georgia,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/nato-and-the-eu-desert-georgia/2016/06/16/20f2c7dc-33be-11e6-8758-d58e76e11b12_story.html?utm_term=.2b1019347f60 (accessed May 3, 2017).

4. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Jen Stoltenberg and the Chairman of the Tri-Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mladen Ivanić,” February 2, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_140549.htm (accessed May 3, 2017).

the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill that barred Ukraine from committing to “a non-bloc policy which means non-participation in military-political alliances.”⁵

In light of Russia’s aggression, the Ukrainian people have demonstrated, whether on the streets of the Maidan or through the ballot box, that they see their future allied with the West, not under Russian domination. This is especially true under the leadership of Petro Poroshenko. While NATO should continue to foster closer relations with Ukraine, it is important to be up-front that Ukraine has a long way to go before NATO membership becomes a serious possibility.

Keeping the Door Open

To show that NATO’s open-door policy still applies, the U.S. should do the following at the Brussels mini-summit:

- **Keep the door open.** The U.S. should ensure that NATO’s open-door policy is explicitly clear in any communiqué issued for the 2017 mini-summit.
- **Make clear that Russia does not have a veto right.** Russia should never be seen as having a veto over a potential country’s membership in NATO, including Ukraine. Just because a country was once occupied by the Soviet Union or under the domination of the Russian Empire does not mean it is blocked from joining the Alliance in perpetuity.
- **Ensure that NATO meets with the three aspirant countries at the head-of-state level.** Even though the May meeting is not a full summit, the NATO heads of state should make time to meet with the leaders of the three aspirant countries. This would send the right message of support.

- **Establish realistic expectations for Ukraine.** The U.S. should foster continually closer relations between NATO and Ukraine, while recognizing that NATO membership is not currently a realistic option.

- **Ensure that Georgia continues to progress toward membership.** In Brussels, the U.S. should ensure that the Alliance is clear that Georgia’s successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that are bringing Georgia closer to membership.

The Importance of the Open-Door Policy Should Not Be Underestimated

NATO has done more than any other organization, including the European Union, to promote democracy, stability, and security in the Euro-Atlantic region. This was accomplished by enticing countries to become a part of the club. While it may be tempting to view Montenegro’s accession to NATO as a closing ceremony for enlargement, that would be a substantial mistake. It is in America’s interest that NATO’s door remain open to deserving European countries.

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5. Valentina Pop, “Ukraine Drops Nato Membership Bid,” *EuObserver*, June 4, 2010, <https://euobserver.com/news/30212> (accessed June 9, 2016).