

The Bush Administration's Stance on the Next Round of NATO Enlargement

SIGNIFICANCE:

The administration supports enlargement on the grounds that it will expand the 'Western zone of peace and prosperity'. While this is a credible and coherent rationale, it sets NATO on a path that will lead to its continued evolution away from its roots as a military alliance, a development that has not been extensively considered in Washington.

ANALYSIS:

After meeting US President George Bush and other alliance leaders in Brussels in June, NATO Secretary General George Robertson stated clearly that the "zero-option" of not offering any applicant countries an invitation to join the alliance was "off the table" for the Prague Summit, scheduled for November 2002 (see OADB, May 8, 2001, I). As was the case in the earlier round of enlargement, Washington will drive decision-making on who will be invited. While a number of NATO countries are concerned about the potential membership of the three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), strong US support could overcome any opposition.

Expansion plans. At least three expansion options have been considered in Washington:

1. Big Bang. In addition to the three Baltic states, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Macedonia have formally applied for NATO membership (Croatia has now informally joined the list). Proponents of a 'big bang' expansion advocate inviting all (or at least all but Albania, Croatia and Macedonia) at the Prague Summit in order to be finished with the process. They also want to ensure that Romania and Bulgaria do not fear being left out (see OADB, May 29, 2001, II) after having made so many political, economic and military decisions precisely to stay in the queue of applicant nations (most visibly, supporting military action in relation to Kosovo despite overwhelming popular domestic opposition). Critics complain that all credibility established by NATO's Membership Action Plan criteria would be lost if this strategy is implemented, as would any ambiguity regarding the alliance's openness to future membership of Ukraine and/or Russia. Since Ukraine would not be part of the big bang, charges that it has been irretrievably consigned to an eastern orientation would be harder to refute.

2. Regatta. Advocates of a 'regatta', a variant of the big bang approach, believe all the aspirants should be invited to join NATO in November 2002, but that the alliance should only formally admit countries once they have met the criteria for membership. While this provides more flexibility than a strict big bang, the US Senate is unlikely to ratify any document promising membership to countries before they have met the necessary criteria.

3. Slovenia-Slovakia strategy. Those determined only to invite applicant countries ready to join NATO, many of whom are also concerned about Russia's reactions to the alliance's extension to territory of the former Soviet Union, argue that only Slovenia and Slovakia should be invited to join the alliance. Slovenia and Slovakia have excellent geostrategic locations, both offering land bridges to Hungary. The main downside of following this approach for the administration would be that Russia could be at least perceived to have succeeded in intimidating NATO.

The most likely Bush proposal is to invite Slovenia, Slovakia and the three Baltic countries. It would be far better politically for the White House to risk alienating Russia over admitting the Baltic states than to be seen to allow Russia a veto over NATO membership. This is despite concerns about

whether Latvia and Estonia (which are further from meeting the accession criteria than Lithuania and have potentially problematic Russian minorities) are ready to join. The other main concern over admitting these five countries is that the two rounds of enlargement would have been overwhelmingly oriented to the north.

Alliance rationale. There is little debate in Washington about what the addition of more member countries means for NATO as a military alliance; neither Slovenia nor the Baltic states are being considered for their potential military contributions. If there was any real concern that a potential member's security was threatened and had to be defended, the US Senate would be unlikely in the ratification process to acquiesce in providing an Article V security guarantee.

Instead, it is striking that the Bush administration is using the same arguments for enlargement as did its predecessor: to extend the 'Western zone of peace and prosperity' eastward to include those countries that have a less firmly established system of market democracy. The Baltic states may want to join as a hedge against a resurgent Russia, but there is much less concern in Washington today about this than during the first round of enlargement.

Enlargement politics. No current aspirant for membership can claim a constituency in the United States as significant as Poland enjoyed in the first round of enlargement. However, the Baltic states, which have a joint 'Baltic-American' lobby in Washington, have many allies in high places on Capitol Hill and in leading US newspapers. Any sign that they will not be included will bring immediate criticism, which explains the substance of Bush's speech in Warsaw in June, which aimed to dispel any doubts about inviting them (see OADB, June 18, 2001, III).

US citizens of central and eastern European descent comprise a significant percentage of the electorate in key Midwestern and Northeastern states such as Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania and New York. These groups tended to vote solidly Republican in the 1980s, but many turned against then-President George Bush senior in 1992, in part over frustration with his slow approach to recognising breakaway Soviet republics the previous year. Although Bush senior won nine of the ten congressional districts with the highest concentration of Polish-Americans in his 1988 presidential victory, he won only three of these in 1992. The new administration is mindful of the need to win the support of these voters in the next election.

Given these political realities, Senate Democrats are also unlikely to mount any serious challenge to an administration proposal to invite all three Baltic countries into the alliance when the White House submits a formal resolution of ratification to the Senate. Some Democrats will worry about Russia's reaction, as they did in the earlier round of expansion, but this group is relatively small in number. Vocal concerns are also likely to be expressed by some rightwingers that this round of enlargement is not militarily significant. However, this sentiment will probably be overwhelmed by the satisfaction of many conservatives if the Baltic countries are brought into the alliance.

NATO and Russia. The Clinton administration was always careful not to lay out criteria for membership that would exclude Russia, stating that the door was open to the country's eventual accession. Bush and his advisers are now saying the same thing. Nevertheless, neither Russia nor the United States seems particularly serious about the proposition:

- The Permanent Joint Council established in the 1997 NATO- Russia Founding Act has done little to foster a Russian voice in NATO affairs.
- China's reaction to any extension of NATO's Article V security guarantee to Russia would almost certainly be exceptionally hostile. -- Russia already faces huge military reform challenges, even before consideration of the type of military changes that would be necessary to achieve interoperability with an institution dominated by the United States.

CONCLUSION:

Although Russia will complain bitterly about NATO expansion to the Baltic states, the administration is likely to push for Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to be invited into the alliance. The political consequences of appearing to capitulate to Russia are too great to avoid this, whatever the military disadvantages of planning for the defence of these vulnerable states. Adding to this political calculus is the recognition that the new members would be as pro-Washington as those which joined in 1999.

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