

OPINION

NATO's Next Round: Why Geostrategy Matters for Lithuania

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In less than six months, leaders of the most successful collective defense alliance in history, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), will gather in Washington to honor the 50th anniversary of its founding. At the Washington Summit in April, 1999, NATO officials will unveil the Alliance's new Strategic Concept which will serve as the guiding framework and blueprint for NATO operations and policies in the post-Cold War era. In addition, NATO will formally integrate the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland - the first new members to join the Alliance since the collapse of the Soviet Union - into its ranks. Both events are historically significant for the Alliance and demonstrate that NATO is adapting to the new international security situation that has emerged since 1991.

In addition to the ceremonies and speeches at the Washington Summit, there will be pressure on NATO leaders to announce when the next round of enlargement will occur. This pressure will be coming undoubtedly from aspirant states in Central and Eastern Europe. Possibly, the new entrants may also exert some pressure on the other 16 member-states to offer a timetable on when additional members may be invited to join. To expect the Alliance to make such a pronouncement in April, however, is both unrealistic and out of touch with the political realities in Washington and other NATO member-state capitals.

The "naming of names" or announcement of a "timetable" for when the next round of invitations may be extended most likely will not be declared at the Washington Summit for the following reasons: U.S. and European officials are suffering from, what one senior Baltic official called, "NATO fatigue." This fatigue, not to be misinterpreted as opposition to further enlargement, stems from the fact that a significant amount of political capital was exerted in the latest round of enlargement, both between Alliance member-state governments and within each country's respective domestic government. The political capital was expended in order to ensure that there was both consensus on the candidates being invited and that the enlargement treaty would be ratified in each member-states' respective legislature. The need for such an effort is evidenced by the numerous amendments proposed and ultimately defeated in the U.S. Senate attempting to ensure that open-ended enlargement of the Alliance did not occur. In addition, the decision to invite only three candidate countries instead of four or five required arguably some political wrangling and convincing between U.S. and European officials.

Another significant reason for why NATO leaders probably will not announce the next round of enlargement in April is the need to evaluate how well and at what cost the three new countries integrate into existing NATO structures. This, possibly more than any other factor, may determine whether there will even be another round of enlargement in the next decade. If the three new countries integrate quickly with moderate cost to the Alliance and demonstrate that they are willing to share the burdens associated with membership, i.e. costs, peacekeeping operations, and out of area operations, then the outlook for future rounds of enlargement is promising. If, however, one or more of the new entrants fails to meet NATO's standard requirements or cannot shoulder the burdens of being a full member, the future for

additional membership, at least in the near term, for any aspirant country will be seriously reexamined.

The other major reason for why NATO leaders are unlikely to extend additional invitations in April is the desire to have NATO remain a collective defense and not a collective security alliance. Created in the tumultuous early years of the Cold War, NATO and its member-states proved dedicated to the cause of guaranteeing stability and security for all free people living in Western Europe and North America. Unquestionably, the bedrock on which the Alliance earned its reputation and justified its existence was Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty which states that “an armed attack against one or more of (signatory parties) in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all; and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith such action as it deems necessary to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” To move the Alliance away from the mission of collective defense to that of collective security a term which is devoid of a military component for the defense of common territory or the privilege of collective offensive action against an aggressor would represent a fundamental transformation of NATO.

For many members of the U.S. Congress who lived through the darkest days of the Cold War, NATO symbolized the commitment and sacrifice the United States and its European allies were willing to make to defend their freedoms and values. At the center of this symbol was the pledge by all signatories that, if attacked by an outside aggressor most likely the Soviet Union a country’s allies would come to its aid in unity. The respect that developed over the decades for NATO has been transferred to a younger generation of incumbent and emerging leaders and opinion makers. For them, honoring the same pledges of defense, security, and stability is what NATO is all about.

Another indicator of this can be seen in the final vote in the U.S. Senate to ratify the enlargement treaty. Although it passed by an overwhelming margin (80-19), the fact that the defeated amendment proposed by Senator John Warner (R-VA), the incoming chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, received more than 40 votes, albeit most votes were from Senators who were not well-versed on the issue, indicates that fundamentally transforming NATO from a mission of collective defense to collective security is not in the U.S. national interest.

So, what does this mean for future rounds of NATO enlargement? Arguably, the next round of NATO enlargement will be very complicated; many pressures will be facing NATO leaders, in particular Washington, in the next round. The United States will have to be promoter and chief advocate for a next round. None of Europe’s major powers have declared a strategic interest in enlarging the Alliance to include other Central and Eastern European states. Germany’s primary interest in agreeing to enlarge NATO in this round was to ensure that its eastern border was protected by having Poland as the new front line state in the security vacuum that exists in Eastern Europe. France agreed because it wanted to ensure that Germany remained committed to the European Monetary Union and the introduction of a single European currency a way to tie Germany to Europe. Britain agreed because, like the rest of the NATO member-states with the possible exception of Turkey it could not produce a legitimate argument against enlarging NATO.

Thus, the only real debate about NATO in Europe during the past few years was how many countries would be invited to join in the first round. In the end, the

decision to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland was based more on a geopolitical than on a geostrategic basis. This phenomenon will not be repeated again. Western policy-makers, especially those in the U.S. Congress, are going to need to be convinced that a further round of NATO enlargement is in their own country's national and NATO's overall security interests.

Geopolitical refers to the influence of physical factors such as geography, economics, and demography on the decisions and foreign policies of an international state or actor. Geostrategic, on the other hand, recognizes the influence of physical factors such as land and demographics and places a value on these factors based on their importance in initiating, conducting, complementing or completing a military objective. In simplest terms, geostrategic means the value of a physical position required for the conduct of war.

Foremost on the minds of policy-makers in determining whether there will be another round of NATO enlargement will be to assess the geostrategic importance of the candidate countries to NATO's security in relation to the new Strategic Concept, to evaluate the ability of first three new countries to absorb membership costs and integrate successfully into Alliance structures, and to assess Russian attitudes towards further enlargement. In retrospect, the debate that occurred during the latest round of NATO enlargement will be seen as non-existent as compared to the debate that will take place on some countries in the next round.

Another factor to consider for the next round is the likelihood of a larger and more competitive field of candidates. In addition to the applications of the aspirant countries from this latest round competing for Alliance membership, e.g. Romania, Slovenia, the three Baltic states, and Slovakia, there quite possibly may be a few newcomers such as Bulgaria, Sweden, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland. With the exception of Bulgaria, these potential candidates bring not only established ties with Euroatlantic institutions such as the European Union, they also bring well financed militaries, modern weapons systems, and the ability to pay for increased modernization and interoperability costs. Moreover, they border existing NATO member-states, thus, allowing each country to make a geostrategic argument for why they should be awarded membership into the Alliance. While the previous candidate countries may be able to make a few of these same arguments, none of them can make them all.

It is interesting to note that none of the last round's candidate countries with the exception of Poland could be said to be net contributors to the enhancement of NATO area security (note: Hungary does not border a single NATO member-state). These countries can, however, provide strategic value to the Alliance by complementing existing organizational structures. For example, Hungary's military installation in Taszar continues to serve as the intermediate staging base (ISB) for NATO operations in Bosnia. Aspirant countries may follow Hungary's example and demonstrate their strategic value by developing some regional material/technical assets that NATO may lack, e.g. a Baltic air and sea surveillance system or a Baltic air and sea rescue squadron.

What does this mean for Lithuanian aspirations to join NATO? Simply, it means that Vilnius needs to be realistic in its understanding of the Alliance's *raison d'être* and, just as important, of NATO's requirements in accordance with its new Strategic Concept. NATO leaders, themselves, clearly recognize the need to enlarge the Alliance to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, they also understand that any future enlargement can only be consummated if it brings

tangible benefits to the organization itself. For Vilnius, this means that it must accept it cannot consider or advocate itself to be a net contributor to the security of the transatlantic area. Instead, it should promote itself as being able to provide crucial strategic assets that will complement greater NATO-area security. With the focus of next year's Washington Summit more on the new Strategic Concept than on announcing new members, Lithuanian officials have the opportunity to not only develop a strong rationale and campaign for why their country belongs in NATO but also to continue to reform and enhance the country's military capabilities that will demonstrate Lithuania to be a "strategic asset" to the Alliance.

How should Vilnius best take advantage of this new "opportunity"? It needs to change its argument for why it deserves NATO membership. The standard argument has rested on the pillars of wanting to be part of the transatlantic institutions and western society which Lithuania was unjustly deprived of in 1940, to be a contributor to stability and prosperity of this area, to be part of an indivisible transatlantic security architecture, i.e. NATO, which does not seek to establish dividing lines in Europe, and to maintain good neighborly relations with Russia and all of the countries in the Baltic Sea region. While seemingly valid, this argument is tired, outdated, and ineffective. This argumentation combined with the need for reforming, refocusing, and rebuilding national defense capabilities failed to convince Western policy-makers of the benefits of Lithuanian (or Baltic) membership in the Alliance, and, as a result, NATO leaders decided not to extend an invitation to Lithuania to join the Alliance in Madrid in July, 1997.

What then should Vilnius' new argument be? While recognizing the need to influence the geopolitics of Alliance decision-making, Vilnius' argument emphasize how Lithuanian membership in NATO benefits is geostrategically valuable for the enhancement of NATO member-states' security. The argument should be based on the premise that Lithuania seeks to become a greater contributor in the advancement of the zone of Euroatlantic stability. It seeks to do this by pursuing the following:

- Strengthening relations with Euroatlantic institutions and their respective participating member nations as a means of demonstrating Lithuania's commitment to improving the economic, political, and security structures which have proven to be vital for maintaining peace, prosperity, and stability in Europe.

- Increasing transparency in relations with Russia as a means of showing Moscow that Lithuania seeks to maintain good neighborly relations and advocates the involvement, not isolation, of Russia into Euroatlantic economic, political, and security institutions. This policy has already yielded some success when, in June, 1998, then-Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov stated that Lithuania has the best relations with Moscow of all the Baltic states and that the Estonia and Latvia should follow Vilnius' example.

- Conducting constructive dialogue with respect to Kaliningrad with Russia and Poland over the best approach to address the economic, political and security issues. By Lithuania and Poland advocating greater economic development of Kaliningrad, it demonstrates to Russia and Lithuania and NATO recognize the strategic sensitivities of Kaliningrad to Russia and is actively attempting to involve, not isolate, this region. With NATO's decision to invite Poland to become a full member in the Alliance, Lithuania seeks to improve its own relationship with Kaliningrad and does not believe that the status of Kaliningrad should be used or cited as a reason for withholding an invitation to join the Alliance.

- Advocating NATO membership of at least one Baltic state, preferably Lithuania, for the next round of Alliance enlargement. Lithuania is the only Baltic candidate which borders a NATO member-state (Poland), and, in strict geostrategic terms, would be a logical choice for extending NATO's Article 5 security guarantee. Also, by bordering a NATO member-state, NATO troops and materials can be deployed quickly in the event of a threat to Baltic regional security. Using examples such as the creation of the joint Lithuanian-Polish Battalion (LITPOLBAT) and Lithuanian participation in and hosting of Partnership for Peace exercises are important elements of this policy.

- Increasing defense expenditures as percentage of GDP over the next five years to enhance national military capabilities to meet NATO standards and interoperability requirements. The increase in defense expenditures is being prioritized to include the strengthening of regional materials that will complement existing NATO assets, i.e. the new Baltic air surveillance and radar coverage system based in Lithuania. With respect to costs, Lithuania does not seek to build a huge military but rather, it seeks to provide the assets that would complement and reinforce NATO structures. By stressing that it is both addressing "quality of life" concerns and purchasing anti-tank and anti-air defense systems, it sends the message, particularly to the United States, that Vilnius is pursuing a responsible defense policy plan that involves the improvement in the standards for its troops and the acquisition of basic armaments needed for its national defense.

- Discussing the issue of Lithuania inclusion in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty which would provide for a limit on the development of Lithuanian national armed forces. Membership in CFE demonstrates to Western policy-makers and Moscow that Vilnius does not plan to engage in an irresponsible massive military build-up. In fact, Lithuanian membership in CFE would provide Vilnius with a comprehensive blueprint of framework for how its strategic policy and forces should develop, thus allowing Vilnius to prioritize its military requirements and acquisitions necessary for national and regional defense.

By immediately adopting a policy advocating its geostrategic value to the Alliance, Vilnius would be taking advantage of a new momentum which has emerged: the interest of some key Euroatlantic states in the development of Northern Europe. The United States, Sweden, and Denmark are the three main advocates of developing this region in all fields including political, economic, and security cooperation. A major tenet of this new momentum is to improve economic relations with Northwestern Russia and Kaliningrad. Politically, the flurry of Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) that have been proposed by numerous Nordic and continental European countries is indicative of a desire for greater inclusion of the Baltic Sea region into the Euroatlantic institutions.

Militarily, the possibility of opening the CFE treaty to include the Baltic states is another significant indicator of the West's interest in demonstrating to Russia that the Baltic states are considered part of Europe and not part of a Russian sphere of influence. Moreover, the U.S.-initiatives such as the recent review by the Department of Defense to evaluate Baltic military capabilities and needs and the Baltic-U.S. Charter should be seen as indicators of the strong support that exists in Washington for seeing greater inclusion of Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors into the West. Finally, the continued improvement of bilateral relations with Russia should be seen as a "comparative advantage" and should be used by Lithuanian officials as proof that

Lithuania is employing and pursuing a “mature” and “national interest-centered” foreign policy.

By adopting this strategy and continuing to develop its national military capabilities and assets, Vilnius can dramatically increase its chances in being considered a serious contender for membership in the next round of NATO enlargement.