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Measuring NATO's outreach

Since the Madrid Summit, skeptics of NATO enlargement have focused primarily on the financial costs of the policy as has been made evident by a number of recent opinion pieces by leading members of Congress.

While enlargement costs are an important consideration, they are manageable. More importantly, the financial costs of enlargement pale in comparison to the damage that a Senate rejection would do to U.S. global leadership and to NATO.

As skeptics of enlargement continue to debate the policy, three fundamental implications of a Senate rejection should frame the discussion.

Senate rejection would raise serious doubts in Europe about continued American presence and leadership. By turning its back on this NATO decision, the Senate would damage a working European security system in which American engagement is the core element. Failure to ratify NATO enlargement would reduce U.S. credibility and signal to potential challengers that Washington is

entering a new phase of isolationist foreign policy.

Senate rejection would also lead to an overwhelming sense of betrayal in the three candidate countries and those partners hoping to benefit from NATO's open door policy. A vote against enlargement would damage NATO's ability to promote stability in Central and Eastern Europe and undermine the positive influence that the United States currently enjoys in the region. To political reformers in the candidate countries who have devoted considerable resources to meeting criteria for membership in NATO, a rejection by the U.S. Senate could create a sense of isolation on par with Munich, the Yalta accords or the abandonment of Hungary in 1956.

Finally, a Senate rejection would suggest to Russia that it can have a negative influence on Alliance decisions. Russia has not accepted

enlargement and is seeking ways to stop this first round either through the ratification process — or at least to make it so difficult as to prevent any further enlargement. If enlargement fails, Russia will have made substantial political gains in Europe and may be inspired to do more to affect NATO decisions. Meanwhile, a rejection of enlargement would reopen the question of a strategic vacuum between Germany and Russia.

Skeptics should recognize that NATO enlargement has already done much to enhance security in Europe. Countries with historical animosities (such as Hungary and Romania) have completed bilateral treaties to solve minority problems. All three candidates have established stable civil-military relations and made successful efforts to consolidate democracy.

Additionally, these countries have been active participants in NATO's Partnership for Peace, are preparing their armed forces for military integration into NATO, and have participated in the U.S.-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

NATO enlargement has accelerated a process of overcoming artificially imposed divisions brought on by the Cold War. NATO has successfully completed the NATO-Russia Founding Act which demonstrates that NATO can have enlargement and a cooperative relationship with Russia simultaneously. Russia itself has gained from the process as the G-7 probably would not have become the Summit of the Eight without NATO enlargement.

Most importantly, NATO enlargement is sound strategic policy. By bringing in three countries now, and keeping the door

open to further enlargement, NATO will prevent the nationalization of armed forces in new members by integrating them into a multilateral and transparent defense planning process. NATO is stabilizing a region where great power security competition caused world war twice this century. Moreover, the three invited countries augment NATO's military personnel — enhancing NATO's collective defense and out-of-area force projection capabilities.

As skeptics debate the financial costs of NATO enlargement, they should consider that these gains in European security would be lost if the Senate were to reject NATO enlargement.

Recent nonbinding congressional action unanimously recommended a cap on the amount the United States is expected to spend on NATO enlargement. Specific restrictions on spending based solely on preliminary cost estimates rather than detailed study are unwise. Yet this action demonstrates that mechanisms exist both to diffuse the cost issue and signal to European allies that they must share the financial burden. While the Clinton administration must do more to explain the details of enlargement costs and respond promptly and frankly to legitimate congressional inquiries, the debate should not be allowed to derail NATO enlargement.

After World War II, the United States created a new security system based upon the League of Nations and then walked away from its responsibilities due to the Senate rejection of the League. The resulting costs of World War II were paramount on the minds of NATO's founders. Their concerns then about U.S. engagement in Europe remain valid today.

Now that enlargement has been agreed upon by 16 NATO heads of state, it is essential for those who support NATO to recognize the stakes in the Senate ratification debate. While there will be minimal financial costs to enlargement, the costs of not enlarging would certainly be much greater than those of moving ahead.

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