



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# Time for NATO to Close Its Door

The Alliance Is Too Big—and Too Provocative—for Its Own Good

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The NATO alliance is ill suited to twenty-first-century Europe. This is not because Russian President Vladimir Putin says it is or because Putin is trying to use the threat of a wider war in Ukraine to force neutrality on that country and to halt the alliance's expansion. Rather, it is because NATO suffers from a severe design flaw: extending deep into the cauldron of eastern European geopolitics, it is too large, too poorly defined, and too provocative for its own good.

Established in 1949 to protect Western Europe, NATO was a triumph at first. It held an advancing Soviet Union at bay, kept the peace, and enabled the economic and political integration of Western Europe. After the end of the Cold War, the United States and various countries in central and southeastern Europe encouraged a dramatic enlargement of the alliance, opening NATO's doors to more than a dozen nations in

successive rounds of expansion. Today, the alliance is a loose and baggy monster of 30 countries, encompassing North America, western Europe, the Baltic states, and Turkey. This expanded NATO wavers between offense and defense, having been involved militarily in Serbia, Afghanistan, and Libya. The sheer enormity of the alliance and the murkiness of its mission risk embroiling NATO in a major European war.

To simplify its strategic purpose and to improve its defensive capacities, NATO should publicly and explicitly forswear adding any more members. The alliance should make clear that its long phase of expansion is over. Ending the open-door policy, tricky as it would be to execute, and rethinking the security architecture of central and eastern Europe would not be a concession to Putin. To the contrary, it is necessary in order for the most successful alliance of the twentieth century to endure and prosper in the twenty-first.

### **BIGGER ISN'T BETTER**

The original NATO alliance served three main functions. First and foremost was defense. The Soviet Union had moved swiftly westward during World War II, swallowing independent nations and entrenching itself as a major European power. NATO did not reverse this trend but rather managed it by setting up a perimeter beyond which the Soviet Union could not go. Second, NATO resolved the endemic problem of Western European security and, in particular, the problem of alternating French, German, and British antagonism. Transforming France, Germany, and the United Kingdom from periodic enemies into steadfast allies was a recipe for lasting peace. Finally, NATO guaranteed U.S. engagement in European security, precisely what World War I and its confusing aftermath had failed to do.

From 1949 to 1989, NATO fulfilled all of these core functions. The Soviet Union never sent its tanks through the Fulda Gap. Instead, it fashioned a Soviet version of NATO, the Warsaw Pact, which was dedicated to countering American power in Europe, to restraining Germany, and to solidifying a Soviet military presence from East Berlin to Prague to Budapest. In Western Europe, NATO kept the peace so effectively that this function of the alliance was almost forgotten. War between France and Germany became inconceivable, enabling the eventual creation of the European Union. Despite the Vietnam War, despite Watergate, and despite the energy crisis of the 1970s, the United States never withdrew from Europe. Washington was no less invested in European security in 1989 than it was in 1949. In other words, the NATO alliance had worked brilliantly.

But then came a dramatic period of redefinition. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush based their NATO policy on two assumptions. The first was that NATO was the best vehicle for guaranteeing European peace and security. The spirit of French-German reconciliation could be expanded together with NATO, so the thinking went, reducing the risk that a nonaligned European state would acquire nuclear weapons and go rogue. In a similar vein, NATO expansion was seen as a hedge against Russia. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and many eastern European leaders sensed that the 1990s were anomalous and that Moscow would return to form sooner or later. When it did, an expanded NATO could be the bulwark against Russia that the original alliance had been against the Soviet Union.

The second assumption behind NATO expansion followed from optimistic ideas about the international order. Perhaps Russia was on the path to democracy, and a Russian democracy would naturally enjoy cooperating with NATO. Perhaps Russia was not becoming a democracy, but it would nevertheless be beholden to an American-led order. In 2003,

the U.S. State Department's Office of Policy Planning generated a paper titled "Why NATO Should Invite Russia to Join." This was not to be, but U.S. policymakers assumed that the magnetic Western model would attract Russia to Europe as it would an array of countries not yet in NATO: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. NATO and the Western political model would walk forward hand in hand. Given how well NATO had worked so far, more NATO would by definition equal more peace, more integration, more order.

Both of the assumptions behind NATO expansion turned out to be off the mark. A structure created for midcentury Western Europe made little sense for post-Cold War eastern Europe. The original NATO had been delimited—by the Iron Curtain, by geography, and by politics. Outside NATO, Austria and Finland were not up for grabs: they were formally neutral but made their allegiances clear by quietly supporting the imperatives of Western security. Moreover, the horrors of World War II had tamped down nationalism in Western Europe, which has a history of strong nation-states. After 1945, there were no outstanding questions about the borders among them. No outside power, not the Soviet Union, not China, was willing to change the borders of Western Europe. Thus could NATO excel at being, as it was supposed to be, a defensive military alliance.

An expanded NATO operates entirely differently in eastern Europe. There is in 2022 no equivalent to the Iron Curtain, and in Europe's east geography does not constrain NATO expansion. Instead, the alliance is awkwardly and haphazardly sprawled across eastern Europe. The Kaliningrad region is a small island of Russia within a sea of NATO territory, which runs in a swerving line from Estonia down to the Black Sea. Twenty-first-century NATO is enmeshed in the tortuous question of where Russia's western border ends and Europe's eastern border begins, a question that since the seventeenth century has been the cause

of countless wars, some of them emanating from Russian imperialism and some from Western invasions. NATO randomly crosses dozens of dividing lines in the ruthless playground of empires, nation-states, and ethnicities that is eastern Europe. The alliance is not the cause of regional instability, but as a nonneutral presence and an object of Russian enmity, it cannot be separated from this instability. Perhaps if all European countries (other than Russia) were NATO members, the alliance could be an effective bulwark against Moscow, but this is far from the case.

The unanticipated perils of expanding NATO have been compounded by the open-door policy, which renders the alliance's eastern flank incomprehensible. NATO's declaration in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia will someday become members was at best aspirational and at worst insincere. Yet the potential for the eastward movement of NATO's border is very real, as recent talks about the potential accession of Finland and Sweden have underscored. Moreover, the Ukrainian government's drive to enter NATO has embroiled the alliance in the region's most explosive ethnonationalist conflict, even if advocates of NATO autonomy see Ukrainian membership as purely a matter of respecting the alliance's charter, which enshrines the open-door policy, or of Kyiv's God-given right to choose its allies. A defensive alliance is unequipped to handle a conflict between a nonmember seeking membership and a nuclear power hell-bent on denying that membership. That is a conflict NATO can only lose and one that might even threaten the existence of the alliance if a member state such as Poland or Lithuania were pulled into the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

An additional risk to an expanding NATO is the international order around it. Rather than wishing to join the U.S.-led order in Europe, Russia seeks to build an international order of its own and to contain American power. Ironically, NATO expansion or the promise of it aids Putin in this effort. It supports his narrative of Western betrayal and

justifies Russian interventionism to the Russian public. In Russia, NATO is perceived as foreign and unfriendly. Its expansion is a pillar of Putin's domestic political legitimacy. Russia needs a leader, so Putin's logic runs, who can say no to an alliance constructed to say no to Moscow.

## **BACK TO DEFENSE**

NATO must change course by publicly and explicitly refusing to add any more member states. It should by no means go back on its commitments to countries that have already joined—U.S. credibility in Europe depends on honoring them—but it must revisit the assumptions that undergirded NATO expansion in the 1990s. With the alliance already overextended in one of the world's most dangerous neighborhoods, incorporating Ukraine would be strategic madness. The theater-of-the-absurd quality of the West's attachment to the open-door policy is itself insulting to Ukraine (and to Georgia) and will over time generate ill will toward Washington. Even if everyone knows that what they say is at odds with reality, Ukrainians and Americans alike muddy the waters and invite distraction by not speaking candidly.

The United States needs a new strategy for dealing with Russia in eastern Europe, one that does not rely primarily on NATO. The alliance is there to defend its members, and closing the open door would help it do so. No doubt, ending expansion would require difficult diplomacy. It would contradict the often-repeated promises of U.S. and European officials and break with precedent. But an alliance that cannot act in its own interest and that clings to disproven assumptions will undermine itself from within. Survival demands reform, and finalizing NATO's membership would enable an approach attuned to the region's complexities, to an international order in which the Western model does not reign supreme, and to the revisionism of Putin's Russia, which is not going away any time soon.

The United States and its European allies and partners should at the same time propose a new institution for deliberations with Russia, one that would focus on crisis management, deconfliction, and strategic dialogue. NATO should play no part in it. It is worth sending the message to Moscow, perhaps for the leader who comes after Putin, that NATO is not the be all and end all of European security. Most important, Washington should proceed with caution. The status quo is precarious, and any inch that can be gained from U.S.-European-Russian diplomacy is worth gaining. The odds that such diplomacy will succeed are small, but to not give it a chance would be an unforgivable error.

Instead of relying on NATO, Washington should use economic statecraft in the coming conflicts with Russia. Along with the European Union, the United States could employ a combination of sanctions, measures to block the transfer of technology, and efforts to isolate Russia from European and American markets to pressure Russia on Ukraine and on other areas of disagreement. This is hardly a novel idea, but Russia's less-than-modern economy and relative financial weakness make it a good target for such measures.

In the event of a new military conflict with Russia, the United States should form an ad hoc coalition with allies and partners to deal with possible threats instead of directly involving NATO (unless Russia attacks a NATO member). Since 1991, NATO's track record on non-NATO territory has been checkered, featuring failed missions in Afghanistan and Libya. These out-of-area misadventures prove that the alliance should be playing defense, not offense.

Closing NATO's open door will not resolve Washington's problems with Russia. These problems go far beyond the alliance. But ending NATO expansion would be an act of self-defense for the alliance itself, giving it the gifts that greater limitation and greater clarity confer.

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