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THE FUTURE OF NATO: DO BULGARIA AND ROMANIA QUALIFY?

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Before we can answer the question whether any European state qualifies for NATO membership, we need to determine how NATO has evolved and in what way it will be further transformed. The North Atlantic Alliance is in turmoil if not crisis and the reasons are plentiful: insufficient burden sharing by the west Europeans, inefficient decision-making in times of crisis, differing commitments to potential combat missions, and serious political disputes between leading Allies. The newly invited east European states need to reflect that the NATO they are poised to enter is very different to the one that they first petitioned for membership. For the United States, the most vital question is whether the entry of seven new democracies, including Bulgaria and Romania, into the Alliance will help or hinder America's national interests and global strategies.

NATO Present and Future

We have entered a turbulent era in trans-Atlantic relations that may drastically reshape the strategic map of Europe. While NATO may not disappear from the scene, it could increasingly resemble the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) or a mini-UN with a more pronounced emphasis on crisis management, conflict prevention, and "soft security." Alternatively, in addition to promoting stronger bilateral ties with like-minded Allies, Washington may seek a revamped NATO structure that can more effectively intersect with U.S. interests. In this context, it is useful to highlight some of the fundamental questions that are not only troubling for current members but also for all NATO aspirants:

- Is NATO a coherent and effective Alliance or a fractured organization with multiple and diverse objectives? Can NATO act in unison or will it evolve into a looser structure in which certain members respond to specific crises by assembling smaller willing coalitions? How will NATO decision-making be modified to adjust to these new circumstances?
- Will NATO remain as a single and capable military alliance, as well as a security and political alliance? Or will there be a growing division of labor between combat missions and peace-keeping operations with an emphasis on smaller *ad-hoc* coalitions both within and outside of NATO?
- Is NATO largely superfluous for U.S. policy not only in terms of military capabilities and performance, but even in terms of collective political and diplomatic support? If France and

Germany can block the United States on the UN Security Council and in NATO decision-making, will a different sort of trans-Atlantic Alliance emerge, one that bypasses some of Europe's older democracies?

- Will the United States severely diminish its involvement with NATO, both militarily and politically? Washington is increasingly disregarding NATO as an organization in its struggle against rogue regimes and terrorist networks and focusing instead on bilateral relations with more dependable allies. As a result, is NATO's significance declining regardless of its enlargement into the eastern half of Europe?

Europe's New Democracies

America's National Security Doctrine issued in September 2002 declared that the NATO alliance must be able to act wherever common interests are threatened, create coalitions under NATO's own mandate, and contribute to mission-based coalitions. To achieve this: "We must expand NATO's membership to those democratic nations willing and able to share the burden of defending and advancing our common interests." It is primarily in this context that the newly invited countries can be assessed:

- The east Europeans operate on two basic principles – to keep NATO united and effective and to maintain U.S. engagement in Europe. In their estimation, even if the former fails the latter must succeed to help ensure their own security. The obvious fear is that if France or Germany or any other power can block Alliance planning for assistance to a long-standing NATO ally, such as Turkey (and disregard NATO's Article 5), then an Alliance reaction to a potential Russian threat to Estonia, Lithuania, or Poland could prove even more timid.
- All NATO applicants view the United States as the preeminent guarantor of their security, freedom, and national independence. Both publicly and privately, east Europe's political leaders remain skeptical about west Europe's security capabilities and deliveries. Moreover, they are fearful lest some new French-German-Russian axis undermines American engagement in Europe and diminishes their own sense of security. East Europe's objective is not to choose between Europe and America but to help protect Europe by keeping America engaged in the "old continent."
- If Washington sees only obstruction and uncooperativeness in Paris, Berlin, and Brussels, then it can redirect its resources and refocus its interests on more willing allies elsewhere in Europe. Reports that Washington may be planning to move military bases from Germany to Poland indicate that some of the older allies are no longer viewed as dependable or their positions are no longer perceived as strategically significant. Although at present the military potential of the new European democracies is limited, Washington can help invest in developing their military capabilities over the coming decade.

If indeed the United States is determined to cultivate alliances with reliable partners, whether by reinvigorating NATO or by bypassing its cumbersome decision-making procedures, then each NATO aspirant needs to be measured according to five basic standards: domestic stability and democracy; bilateral political cooperation; military collaboration; regional security; and commitment to the anti-terror coalition.

Bulgaria's Qualifications

- ***Domestic Stability and Democracy***

Bulgaria has developed a stable democratic system with a functioning market economy. It has held several free and democratic elections and the political transition between governing parties has been smooth and trouble-free. The policies of all major political forces have been pro-reform and pro-NATO, and even the post-communist Socialist Party has developed a Western orientation. Bulgaria has not experienced any significant ethnic conflicts although the social and economic position of the large Roma minority remains a point of concern as in several other east European states. The sizable Turkish minority is represented in the coalition government.

The Bulgarian economy has been stabilized through an effective currency board system that controls state spending and has registered a steady GDP growth in recent years. However, much of the population experiences low standards of living and foreign investment has been limited. The country still faces problems with corruption and the judiciary system is often ineffective and needs to be more resolutely restructured. Anti-corruption measures have been implemented, but more tangible results will be evident with more comprehensive judicial reform.

Substantial progress has been registered in the restructuring of the armed forces into a modern and combat-ready military tailored to NATO needs. Force Structure Reviews have been completed in full compliance with NATO requirements. Democratic civilian control over the armed forces is being consolidated and the government needs to maintain its commitment to streamlining the armed forces in line with its Defense Plan 2004.

There is comprehensive political and public support for Bulgaria's NATO membership despite the country's financial constraints, and there is a firm commitment to allocate approximately 3% of the GDP to defense spending over the coming years. There is a high level of protection of classified information in compliance with NATO standards while controls over the export of possible dual use weapons and technologies have been tightened.

- ***Bilateral Political Cooperation***

Bulgaria considers itself a partner and ally of the United States and there is overall agreement on major decisions related to Bulgaria's contribution to NATO and the anti-terrorist campaign. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2002-2003 period, Bulgaria has consistently supported U.S. positions unlike several of America's NATO allies. The current center-right government has backed Washington in the Iraqi crisis despite some verbal criticism by the Socialist President Georgi Parvanov and the Socialist opposition in parliament. Although the Socialists are supportive of NATO membership, some of their leaders maintain close links with the Russian authorities, which seek to diminish America's global role. Such ties have weakened over the past decade and it is clearly in U.S. interest to limit Moscow's political interference in Bulgaria's domestic and foreign policy.

- ***Military Collaboration***

Bulgaria has supported U.S. and NATO military operations in both word and deed. It granted air-space for the NATO "Allied Force" operation in Serbia in March-June 1999 and the transit of NATO forces and equipment for the "Joint Guardian" operation in Kosova in July 1999. Bulgaria

played an important role in avoiding a possible crisis in relations between NATO and Russia in June 1999 by denying Russian forces overflight rights during NATO's liberation of Kosova. Sofia interacted with NATO during the transit of KFOR contingents through Bulgarian territory. Bulgaria has also participated in two NATO-led operations: in SFOR (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and in KFOR (Kosova) and is the only NATO PfP state to participate with its own contingent in SFOR.

- ***Regional Security***

Bulgaria maintains good relations with all of its neighbors and has no outstanding disputes. It has played a leading role in a number of regional cooperation formats, including the multi-national South East European Peace-Keeping Force (SEEBRIG), and has hosted its headquarters in the city of Plovdiv. Sofia has participated in the regional security initiative SEDM (South East Europe Defense Ministerial). Bulgaria has played a constructive role vis-à-vis Macedonia and was the first country to recognize Macedonia's independence in 1992. It has also contributed to democratic developments in Serbia following the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.

- ***Anti-Terror Coalition***

In terms of contributions to the U.S.-led anti-terror and anti-rogue states operations, Bulgaria has enabled air, land, and sea transit to coalition forces and the temporary deployment of U.S. aircraft for refueling and cargo-lifting purposes in both the Afghanistan and Iraq operations. It has allocated military units to the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and dispatched an anti-nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) unit on a defensive mission to a country neighboring Iraq. Moreover, Bulgaria has consistently supported the U.S. position toward the Iraqi question on the UN Security Council.

Romania's Qualifications

- ***Domestic Stability and Democracy***

Similarly to its neighbor to the south, Romania has achieved a high level of political stability, held several free and fair elections, and created a democratic political structure. One troubling element has been the parliamentary representation of a populist-nationalist party, which has exploited Romania's economic difficulties. Nevertheless, the country's major political forces are committed to democracy, free markets, and integration into international institutions.

Ethnic relations have remained reasonably stable in Romania although some disputes have been visible with the Hungarian minority. The persistent problem of poverty with regard to the large Roma minority will require more intensive governmental and international involvement.

Romania has displayed economic growth and stabilized the most important macro-economic indicators. With reductions in the public deficit, stabilized inflation, and strengthened foreign relations, both Romania and Bulgaria are pushing toward EU accession over the next few years. However, the IMF has stressed that Bucharest needs to maintain consistency in its economic policies to avoid lurching back toward the stagnant economic conditions notable in the 1990s.

In terms of military progress, Romania has established full civilian control, substantially streamlined its forces, and is intent on modernizing its military hardware. President Ion Iliescu

has asserted that defense spending will not fall below 2.3% of GDP in the next five years. Romania still has some problem areas that need to be tackled more resolutely in the years ahead. In particular, official corruption needs to be combated, the judicial system overhauled, and the screening of ex-Securitate personnel staff continued in order to protect official defense secrets and NATO intelligence.

- ***Bilateral Political Cooperation***

Romania has made significant progress as America's "strategic partner." Bucharest has provided diplomatic support for the U.S. positions in various international venues such as the UN and OSCE. It has backed American immunity from the ICC (International Criminal Court) process and has on occasion taken pro-U.S. positions that were at odds with the European Union. President Bush's visit to Romania after the NATO summit in November 2002 highlighted the closeness of the bilateral relationship.

- ***Military Collaboration***

Romania and America have developed close military contacts, through joint exercises, educational programs, and arms contracts with U.S. companies. Romania is thereby becoming increasingly interoperable with NATO and with American forces. Bucharest has completed a new headquarters for SEEBRIG in Constanta on the Black Sea that will help ensure the unit's interoperability with NATO. Romania has also contributed one ship to the BLACKSEAFOR multinational naval patrol and will play an increasingly important role in this region.

- ***Regional Security***

Romania has endeavored to play a stabilizing role across several regions, including South East Europe and the Black Sea zone. It has participated in several Balkan peace-keeping missions, including in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania, and in several regional security initiatives such as SEDM (South East Europe Defense Ministerial). Bucharest has established a regionally focused anti-crime center in Bucharest under the auspices of SECI, originally an American initiative. It has helped to coordinate, together with Bulgaria, its approach on NATO accession through participation in the "Vilnius 10" group.

- ***Anti-Terror Coalition***

Romania supported the U.S. from the outset after September 11th and participated in the post-war mission in Afghanistan. Intelligence-sharing and law enforcement cooperation has been growing. Bucharest has provided political support for the U.S. operation against Iraq and concrete assistance in the Iraqi campaign, including fly-over rights, use of ports and military facilities, dispatched decontamination, medical, and demining contingents to the Middle East, and pledged to participate in Iraq's post-war reconstruction. Seventy soldiers belonging to Romania's anti-nuclear, biological, and chemical unit (NBC) are stationed in the Persian Gulf region. The unit will intervene behind front lines "for decontamination actions" in the event the Iraqis use chemical or biological weapons against coalition forces.

U.S. Interests in NATO Enlargement

In sum, both Bulgaria and Romania together with the other NATO invitees have matured into self-sustaining democracies. As in Central Europe, American “democracy-building” assistance needs to be privatized and indigenized under competent local control. A self-standing civil society, a broad spectrum of political parties, and a professional free media can develop more effectively without unnecessary, inappropriate, and sometimes counter-productive outside oversight. Such an approach will send a strong signal of trust and commitment to America’s new allies. In the light of the evidence, both Bulgarian and Romanian membership in NATO will directly assist U.S. national interests and global strategies.

- NATO entry is a reward for Bulgaria’s and Romania’s proven record of reform in recent years and their commitment to Western norms and objectives. It will help propel forward the reform process and enable further military development and interoperability with U.S. forces. Although neither country is presently capable of making significant military contributions, both can offer specialized support in particular niches.
- NATO entry for Bulgaria and Romania is a practical method for reinvigorating the trans-Atlantic link and creating a larger pool of interoperable countries with which the United States can construct coalitions for future security operations. NATO as an organization will remain divided into allies of various degrees of dependability for Washington. Bulgaria and Romania can be placed at the high end of the spectrum and their membership can serve to narrow the trans-Atlantic divide or provide new bridges across existing gaps.
- NATO entry for Bulgaria and Romania is a valuable means for buttressing the U.S. position vis-à-vis the European allies. It will give Washington additional voices of support within NATO’s decision-making process and broaden diplomatic and political assistance in various international fora and organizations.
- NATO entry for Bulgaria and Romania will help enhance the shift in the U.S. security focus to the Black-Caspian-East Mediterranean triangle. Located on the Black Sea, Romania and Bulgaria offer more direct routes to the Middle East, across the Black Sea to the Caucasus, or through Turkey. The strategic and economic significance of these regions is increasing, especially with the development of oil and gas lines from Russia and Central Asia and with ongoing regional conflicts that challenge America’s security interests.
- NATO entry for Bulgaria and Romania will encourage other Balkan countries to accelerate their reform programs. It will provide vision and direction to several other states in the region that are preparing for NATO membership, including Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia. It will also help to place future contenders, including Serbia and Montenegro, on track for PfP (Partnership for Peace) and eventual NATO accession. Washington should also support Montenegro’s aspirations toward independent statehood if the EU-sponsored link with Serbia proves unsuccessful. The United States can also take a more active role in ending the UN-mandated *status quo* in Kosova and moving that pro-American aspiring state toward independence. It is plainly evident that the greater number of new European states, the bigger the pool of new American allies.