

The Process of NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States: A Russian Perspective

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It is fairly easy task to summarize the current Russian news on the issue of NATO enlargement insofar as it concerns the Baltic States. In official, political and academic discourse there has been a remarkable amount of agreement and consistency on the subject. Inclusion into the Atlantic alliance of any former Soviet state, it has been stated and restated, would be perceived by the bulk of the Russian political class as a most unfriendly step. Whereas a cool-headed analyst would read such step as an insurance policy against an unstable and potentially aggressive Russia, to the surviving Moscow liberals, this would amount to a vote of no confidence in Russia's struggling and imperfect democracy; and to the much more numerous convenient thinkers, an attempt at containing and pressuring Russia.

If Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were to receive an invitation to begin accession talks, the Russians warn, Moscow could respond in several ways. The first victim would be the Russia-NATO Founding Act, likely to be suspended. Russia's overall relations with the West, and especially the United States, would press for a more robust nuclear posture to balance the perceived threat to national security. The Kaliningrad enclave would assume new strategic importance, not dissimilar from West Berlin or Danzig. The current relationship with Belarus would be upgraded to a regular military alliance.

It is not difficult to dismiss many of these steps as empty posturing. Even if implemented, which is not certain, they would be ineffective and probably do more harm to Russia than to anybody else. Wasn't Moscow's bluff called before? From the reunification of Germany to the Central European countries' joining NATO, Russia threatened, but eventually backed off. Are Russia's current resources sufficient even for a sham confrontation? The country's GDP, even according to the official statistics, and before the August financial collapse, is only 5 percent of the U.S. level, and if one listens to independent think-tankers, even that is twice the real figure in gross economic terms, Russia is just twice the size of Poland - and, unlike Poland, shrinking. Never before has Russia been so dependent on the West. In 1999, it faces debt repayment to the tune of 15-17 billion USD. With Yeltsin's powers waning, the Russian politicians and their oligarchic partners are busy scrambling for power and property rights. Society at large is atomized and disoriented. No strong leader has emerged so far. Zhirinovskiy turned out to be little more than a blustering and thoroughly entertaining parliamentary orator. And, finally, after the defeat it suffered in Chechnya, who is any longer afraid of the Russian army? It would seem logical and perfectly safe then, to go along and ignore Russia. She is simultaneously more constrained than many have expected and is behaving more rationally - at least, abroad, - than many have feared. Pretending that Russia counts for more than it actually does, and babying a country which goes on nursing its wounded pride can't be a long-term policy.

From a long-term perspective, however, Russia remains Europe's main security problem. Until the relationship between Russia and the countries lying all the way to the west of its borders is fully demilitarized, lingering historical suspicions will not let the old continent feel completely free, at last, of the specter of a major confrontation.

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At this point, such demilitarization is not inevitable. It can be assisted or impeded, and it is the results, rather than intentions, that matter.

There is no reason to placate those in Russia who harbor nostalgia for the imperial or Communist past. It may be pathetic to listen to those who still believe that the West, the former Warsaw Pact countries and the Soviet republics owe Russia anything for the spectacular retreat, within two years, from Magdeburg to Smolensk. What is important, however, is to watch the evolution of the middle ground of Russian politics. So far, NATO enlargement Stage I has injected a dose of anti-Americanism into that group. If Stage II were to follow soon, or to hit the borders of mainland Russia, this could grow into a more pronounced alienation not only from the West, but from the immediate neighbors.

These relations are far from ideal now. The extremely slow pace of national consolidation in Latvia and Estonia has made those two nations the prime targets of opportunity for those who seek to monopolize Russian patriotism. Alarming, the Balt-baiters are gaining a following in the various strata of Russian society. A major effort is needed to reverse this trend and lay the foundation for a friendly constructive relationship.

The Russians need to realize that integration with Europe, which still remains their avowed goal, does not solely depend on relations with Germany, France and the rest of the European Union. Russia's new place and role on the continent will be defined to a significant degree by the sort of ties it will develop with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the three Baltic States.

On those relations, the process of NATO enlargement already does and will have an impact. Limiting that impact depends on the pace, scope and nature of the enlargement. While the promise of a future membership in the Alliance cannot be withdrawn, rushing it now would lead to a less, rather than more secure environment in the eastern Baltic region.

The goal of an eventual NATO membership should not obscure other policy options. Enhanced Partnership for Peace is not only a useful mechanism for progressively closer cooperation, but a form of reassurance. Security by means of membership in or association with the European Union appears to offer the Balts a chance of implied Western protection without paying the price of Russian hostility. All told, the ultimate guarantee of the Baltic States' security is a Russia at peace with itself and friendly toward its neighbors. Working toward resolution of outstanding issues with Moscow, while building bridges to the neighboring regions, from Kaliningrad to Karelia to Kola, and using their excellent trading niche, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia can seize upon what may be termed the "Baltic chance" to help bring about a greater Europe, thus escaping the fate of forming a front-line.