

## **Europe's Eastern Promise** **Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement**

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Summary: After the Cold War, NATO and the EU opened their doors to central and eastern Europe, making the continent safer and freer than ever before. Today, NATO and the EU must articulate a new rationale for enlarging still further, once again extending democracy and prosperity to the East, this time in the face of a more powerful and defiant Russia.

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In the early 1990s, after the Iron Curtain lifted, Western leaders seized a historic opportunity to open the doors of NATO and the European Union (EU) to postcommunist central and eastern Europe. By consolidating democracy and ensuring stability from the Baltics to the Black Sea, they redrew the map of Europe. As a result, the continent today is more peaceful, democratic, and free.

This accomplishment was the result of a common U.S.-European grand strategy that was controversial and fiercely debated at the time. The goal was to build a post-Cold War Europe "whole, free, and at peace"; to renew the transatlantic alliance; and to reposition the United States and Europe to address new global challenges. But as successful as the strategy of enlargement has been, the world has changed dramatically since it was forged. The United States and Europe face new risks and opportunities on Europe's periphery and need to recast their strategic thinking accordingly for a new era.

Current policy toward Europe's periphery is increasingly out of date, for three reasons. First, the West has changed. The 9/11 attacks pulled U.S. attention and resources away from Europe and toward the Middle East. The reservoir of transatlantic goodwill and political capital accumulated during the 1990s has evaporated in the sands of Iraq. In Europe, enlargement fatigue has set in thanks to stumbling institutional reforms and the mounting expense of integrating new EU members. It was widely assumed that the western Balkan states (Albania and the former Yugoslav republics) would all eventually join the EU and NATO, but even that can no longer be taken for granted. Turkey's chances of gaining EU membership are fading. Indeed, the window of opportunity to expand the democratic world that opened with the end of the Cold War is now at risk of closing.

Second, the East has changed. The challenge of the 1990s was to consolidate democracy in central and eastern Europe along a north-south axis from the Baltics to the Black Sea. Today's even more difficult challenge is to stabilize the countries of Eurasia, the region where Europe and Asia meet, along a new axis extending eastward from the Balkans across the Black Sea region to the southern Caucasus and including Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Sandwiched between an unstable Middle East to the south and a hostile Russia to the north, these countries are the new flank of the Euro-Atlantic community. Old policies may still work in the Balkans, but countries such as Georgia and Ukraine -- let alone Moldova and Belarus, if and when the latter opens up to the outside world -- are weaker, poorer, and more politically problematic than the central and eastern European countries NATO and the EU sought to integrate earlier. Their claim to be part of Europe is more tenuous, and the perceived Western imperative to help is less obvious. The policy tools developed for central and eastern Europe a decade ago are, accordingly, no longer as effective.

Finally, Russia has changed. In the 1990s, it was a weak, quasi-democratic state that wanted to become part of the West. Now, a more powerful, nationalist, and less democratic Russia is challenging the West. Moscow sees itself as an independent Eurasian power, offering its own authoritarian capitalist model of development as an

alternative to democratic liberalism. It practices a form of mercantilist geopolitical hardball that many in Europe thought was gone for good. Nowhere is this more clear than in its policies toward Europe's periphery, where it is seeking to halt or roll back democratic breakthroughs in places such as Georgia and Ukraine. Moscow's willingness to use its energy resources as a political weapon has made European countries reluctant to confront Russia over its antidemocratic behavior. Until the EU can liberalize its energy markets and diversify its supplies, Moscow will have the upper hand.

In this new strategic environment, Western policy toward the nations on Europe's periphery cannot remain on cruise control as if nothing has changed. NATO and the EU need to articulate a new strategic rationale for expanding the democratic West and devise a new approach to dealing with Russia. There is another opportunity today to advance Western values and security and redraw the map of Europe and Eurasia once more. But new ideas will be necessary to seize it -- and to reinvent the transatlantic alliance in the process.

## OUT WITH THE OLD

The grand strategy of democratic enlargement that lay behind the opening up of NATO and the EU early in the 1990s grew out of the twin imperatives of reuniting Europe following communism's collapse and reinventing the transatlantic alliance for the post-Cold War era. The goal was to consolidate democracy across the eastern half of the continent by anchoring central and eastern European countries to the West. It reflected the vision of a peaceful Europe expanding its foreign policy horizons and sharing global leadership and responsibility with the United States. At the time, Washington concluded that the EU alone was too weak to lead the enlargement process. Thus NATO took the lead in bringing central and eastern Europe into the fold. NATO's membership could more easily be expanded, and extending NATO's security umbrella to countries in those regions was critical to the consolidation of democracy. NATO also contributed to reform by raising its requirements for new members, a "tough love" policy designed to reinforce positive transformation.

As NATO played a key role in taking the security issue off the table and opening its doors to the East, the EU assumed most of the burden of transforming postcommunist societies into liberal democratic ones. EU enlargement policy was an asymmetric negotiation. Candidate countries simply had to accede to the EU's existing *acquis communautaire* -- the full range of its laws, regulations, and institutions. The newcomers had little say in anything but the timeline under which the EU's requirements would be implemented. Nevertheless, it was this transformation that fundamentally tied these countries to the West and thus created enduring security on the continent.

Great care was taken to ensure that countries not included in the initial round of enlargement would not be destabilized. The West did not want to repeat the mistake that U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson made in 1950, when he appeared to sketch a new Western security perimeter and thereby invited the conclusion that countries on the other side of the line were of no interest to the West. Therefore, NATO and EU policy sought to blur the lines between members, potential future members, and partners. In practice, this meant finding new ways to embrace and deepen cooperation with countries that did not seek membership or were not yet realistic candidates for it. NATO explicitly left open the possibility of further expansion down the road. The EU was more circumspect, but it, too, expanded its outreach to countries on Europe's periphery whose future stability and orientation it wanted to shape.

The West's desire to mitigate any negative fallout was perhaps most visible in its handling of Russia. In different yet reinforcing ways, the Americans and the Europeans signaled their strategic desire to pull Russia toward the West in the hope that Moscow would eventually evolve into a partner and perhaps even a *de facto* ally. NATO and EU enlargement were accompanied by an unparalleled effort to engage Moscow and work for Russia's own democratic transformation, while still taking what were seen as its legitimate interests into account. This strategy was not a new effort to contain Russia but an attempt to integrate it -- albeit in a looser form and on a different timeline than that of its smaller western neighbors. And it was not merely rhetoric. NATO rethought its military strategy and force posture in order to underscore that it had no offensive intentions. Moreover, it

offered to expand political and military cooperation and plan for future joint military operations with Russia. The EU set out its own far-reaching plans to deepen cooperation. The West took such steps despite uncertainty over where Russia was headed and despite the fear that Moscow would take advantage of these openings to paralyze Western institutions rather than cooperate with them.

Looking back, Western policy achieved two of its goals -- anchoring much of central and eastern Europe and preventing instability in those countries remaining outside NATO and the EU -- and was partially successful in dealing with Russia. These successes were not inevitable, and their importance should not be underestimated. Had NATO and the EU not acted, Europe today would be a messier, less stable, and more inward-looking place. And Washington would have even fewer allies in dealing with crises beyond Europe, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today, it is only too easy to forget that a decade ago there were concerns that enlargement would create new and sharper divisions between those countries joining NATO and the EU and those remaining on the outside. It has done the opposite. The success of NATO and EU enlargement, and the inclusion of countries such as the Baltic states, set a positive precedent for other former Soviet republics. Following the Rose and Orange Revolutions, democratic leaders in Georgia and Ukraine became more serious about seeking to tie their countries to the West. After all, if the Baltic states could do it, why should they not dare to do the same?

The results in Russia were mixed, however. On the one hand, the train wreck that was so frequently predicted by enlargement critics never happened. New arrangements for cooperation with NATO and the EU were set up, and a breakdown of relations with Moscow was avoided. But the West's broader hopes of establishing deeper relations with a more democratic Russia never materialized. Instead of becoming more democratic and cooperative, Moscow has become more authoritarian and adversarial. Hopes that the West and Russia could find common strategic ground after 9/11 have largely gone unfulfilled, and the two are even further apart now on issues such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Kosovo. The Orange and Rose Revolutions were interpreted in Moscow not as democratic breakthroughs but as threatening developments that needed to be challenged and reversed.

Who or what is responsible for these trends is, of course, an issue of considerable dispute. Was it a lack of U.S. and European imagination and will that allowed Russia to drift in this anti-Western direction? Or was it the result of internal Russian dynamics over which the West had little, if any, influence? Did NATO and EU enlargement push Russia in the wrong direction, or was the West fortunate to act when it did given what has followed? Enlargement has created more democratic stability on Russia's western border than at any time since Napoleon. Yet today, the Kremlin's spin doctors are creating a new stab-in-the-back legend of how the West betrayed Moscow during the 1990s. The gap in historical narratives mirrors the increasingly tense relationship between the West and Russia.

#### ALL QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT?

In light of these new circumstances in Russia, enlargement needs to be rethought from the ground up, starting with its strategic rationale. After the accession of a band of countries from the Baltic states in the north to Bulgaria and Romania in the south, many in the West assumed that the enlargement project was almost complete, with the western Balkans constituting the last piece of unfinished business. They were surprised to suddenly find new countries from Eurasia, and specifically the wider Black Sea region, starting to knock on the doors of NATO and the EU -- and unsure how to respond.

In dealing with these new candidate countries, the West must stick to the values and diplomatic principles it laid down in the 1990s, including the notion that countries are free to choose their alliances. But that alone is unlikely to be enough, because although these countries clearly consider themselves European, many Europeans do not feel the same historical or moral commitment to them or see a compelling strategic need to integrate them. Thus, in addition to moral and political arguments, the United States and Europe need to articulate a strong strategic rationale for anchoring them to the West.

That argument is straightforward. The challenge of securing Europe's eastern border from the Baltics to the Black Sea has been replaced by the need to extend peace and stability along the southern rim of the Euro-Atlantic community -- from the Balkans across the Black Sea and further into Eurasia, a region that connects Europe, Russia, and the Middle East and involves core security interests, including a critical energy corridor. Working to consolidate democratic change and build stability in this area is as important for Western security today as consolidating democracy in central and eastern Europe was in the 1990s. It is not only critical to expanding the democratic peace in Europe but also vital to repositioning the West vis-à-vis both Central Asia and the Middle East. This strategy presents an opportunity to redraw the strategic map of Europe and Eurasia in a way that enhances the security of countries on Europe's periphery as well as that of the United States and Europe.

The United States and Europe also need to rethink what anchoring means in practice. In the 1990s, it meant pursuing membership in NATO and the EU roughly in parallel. Now the West needs to be more flexible and take a long-term view. The goal is to tie these countries as closely to the West as politics and interests on both sides allow. For some countries, this may mean eventual membership in both NATO and the EU; for others, it may mean membership only in NATO; and for the rest, it may mean membership in neither but simply much closer relations. Policy will have to be much more *à la carte* than *prix fixe*.

The link between NATO membership and EU membership should be relaxed, if not dropped. The EU has enough on its plate sustaining its commitments to the western Balkans and Turkey; anything beyond that is probably a nonstarter for the time being. NATO will once again have to take the lead in anchoring countries such as Georgia and others in the wider Black Sea region. The West must also rethink how it should engage and reach out to these countries. If membership is less plausible as a short-term option, then the quality of ties short of membership must be improved to compensate. Outreach must grow in importance and may increasingly become the centerpiece of U.S. and European strategy. At the moment, the fear of future enlargement is one factor actually holding allies back, with institutions afraid of taking even small steps down what some fear could be a slippery slope. Yet precisely because the countries in question are weaker and more endangered, NATO and the EU should actually be reaching out and engaging them earlier. They need the security umbrella and engagement of the West as much, if not more, than the countries of central and eastern Europe did.

The way out of this dilemma is to consider membership a long-term goal and focus in the mean time on strengthening Western outreach and engagement. This means recasting policy tools to address the different needs of the countries that are less developed politically and economically. Tools such as NATO's "membership action plan" should be extended earlier and tied less closely to actual membership commitments, thus allowing these countries to benefit from guidance and engagement while downplaying the question of the end goal. At the same time, the EU needs to enhance its own tools, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Neighborhood Policy, as well as reach out to these countries more directly by offering them political and economic support. When communism collapsed, NATO and the EU had little idea how to reach out to postcommunist countries and anchor them to the West. Bureaucrats in both institutions said it could not be done. But political will and strategic imagination prevailed, and fresh approaches were developed. Political will can do the same today.

As for Russia, neither Washington nor Brussels wants a confrontation with Moscow at a time when they face daunting challenges beyond Europe. But this does not mean the West should abandon its belief that the spread of democracy along Russia's borders contributes to peace and stability just because the current authoritarian rulers in Moscow disagree. Nor should the West abandon its principles and succumb to the sphere-of-influence thinking currently emanating from Moscow. If the United States and Europe still hope that democracy will eventually take root in Russia, they must recognize that consolidating a pro-Western, democratic Ukraine would indirectly encourage democratization in Russia. Of course, antidemocratic forces in Russia will oppose such a move. After all, Moscow only acquiesced in previous rounds of NATO and EU enlargement because it concluded that the United States and Europe were determined to carry them out and that its efforts to oppose the West would be futile. Western unity on issues such as the future of Ukraine is therefore of the utmost importance.

Still, holding true to NATO's and the EU's core principles and expanding these organizations' reach does not mean starting a new Cold War. The West and Moscow should look for other areas in which their interests are more aligned, such as expanding trade and investment or controlling nuclear proliferation and building a new arms control regime. The key question is whether Russia -- when faced with a unified West -- will start to look for common ground. As strong as Russia may appear at the moment, it remains a country with real long-term structural weaknesses and problems. It, too, needs friends and allies, and the United States and Europe should be among them.

## UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Three very different scenarios for the future of Western policy toward Europe's periphery reveal just how high the stakes are in this region. In the best-case scenario, the United States and Europe would regroup under the next U.S. president and launch a new era of transatlantic cooperation by overcoming differences on Iraq, avoiding disagreements over Iran, and stabilizing Afghanistan. This renaissance would include a new and ambitious democratic-enlargement strategy, and the results would be significant. Securing independence for Kosovo without turning Serbia against the West would facilitate the successful integration of the western Balkans into NATO and the EU. In Turkey, the AKP-led government would continue democratic reforms, bringing the country closer to EU accession. Georgia and Ukraine would continue to move closer to the West as well. That prospect would help create positive pressure for democratic change in Azerbaijan and encourage Armenia's reorientation toward the West. By 2012, a reunified West would have begun to build an arc of democratic stability eastward into Eurasia and especially the wider Black Sea region. Realizing that its real adversaries lie elsewhere, Russia would eventually have no choice but to reassess its policy and seek a new rapprochement with the West.

A less optimistic scenario is stagnation. In this case, the United States and Europe would regain some political momentum after 2008 but fail to achieve any significant democratic breakthroughs. A new U.S. administration would manage to stabilize and then extricate itself from Iraq, but transatlantic tensions over Iran and other Middle Eastern issues would persist. Kosovo would achieve independence, but in a manner that leaves Serbia alienated and unable to find its way back onto the path toward EU accession. In the western Balkans, only Croatia would remain on track for both EU and NATO membership. Turkey's prospects for joining the EU would fade, and reforms in Georgia and Ukraine would stall. Azerbaijan would remain an autocratic pro-Western ally increasingly vulnerable to growing radicalization from within. By 2012, the West would have patched up relations across the Atlantic but without breakthroughs in the Balkans or Turkey -- let alone in Ukraine or the wider Black Sea region. All of this would lead to a more competitive relationship with Russia, resulting in stalemate and a new chill in relations with Moscow.

In the worst-case scenario, rather than the West consolidating new democratic breakthroughs, Russia would succeed in a strategy of rollback. The United States and Europe would not achieve a meaningful rapprochement, and they would fail to consolidate democracy in the western Balkans. Kosovo would become independent, but without agreement from all sides. This would launch Serbia on a new nationalist trajectory, bringing further instability to the region. U.S. failure in Iraq would lead to partition, estranging Turkey and prompting Ankara to invade northern Iraq and further loosen its ties to the West. This, in turn, would badly damage Turkey's already strained relations with both Washington and Brussels. Ukraine would drift back to autocracy, and Georgia, the one liberal democratic experiment in the Black Sea region, would lose reform momentum and teeter toward failure. Last November's declaration of a state of emergency in Tbilisi was a reminder of how fragile and vulnerable this experiment is. Using its energy supplies and influence, Russia would emerge as an authoritarian capitalist alternative to the West, attracting autocratic leaders throughout Europe and Eurasia. Rather than a renaissance of the transatlantic alliance, the result would be a retreat of democracy and a further splintering of the democratic West.

As these scenarios make clear, the western Balkans, Georgia, Ukraine, and the wider Black Sea region are less stable and more at risk today than central and eastern Europe were a decade ago. And the stakes are high. A

world in which Ukraine has successfully anchored itself to the West would be very different from one in which it has failed to do so. A world in which Georgia's success has sparked democratic progress in the region and helped stabilize the southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic community would be a much safer one than a world in which Georgia has become an authoritarian state in Russia's sphere of influence. And a world in which the democratic West is ascendant would be very different from one in which an autocratic, nationalist Russia is on the rise.

#### PERIPHERAL VISION

The West needs to find the vision and the will to build on the successes of the 1990s by reproducing them under more challenging conditions. The Atlantic alliance was reinvented in the 1990s after the collapse of communism, but it sorely needs a second renaissance today. A new strategy of democratic enlargement can and must be part of this revival.

The decision to open the doors of NATO and the EU to central and eastern Europe in the 1990s was a triumph of statesmanship and an example of successful crisis prevention. During a time of peace, and in spite of considerable opposition at home and from Moscow, the United States and its European allies acted to lock in democracy and put an end to the geopolitical competition that had historically bedeviled central and eastern Europe. One can only imagine how much worse off the United States and Europe would be today if NATO and the EU had not been enlarged and they now had to worry about instability in the heart of Europe.

If U.S. and European leaders again succeed in linking new democracies to NATO and the EU, ten years from now they will look back at a redrawn map of Europe and Eurasia and be thankful that they acted when they did. If they fail, future generations may well pay a high price for their passivity.