

# NATO Enlargement and Security in the Balkans

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**Abstract:** This article examines the impact of NATO enlargement on security and democratization in East Central Europe in order to draw lessons for aspirants in the Western Balkans. I analyze some of the main arguments of Neo-realists and Neo-liberal Institutionalists on the role of international institutions like the EU and NATO for increasing stability and security, and for fostering cooperation among states. While neither theory wins, the article finds evidence to support some of the main propositions of both the Realist and the Institutionalism schools of thought. The theoretical analysis is then used to draw policy recommendations about the continuing enlargement of NATO and the Euro-Atlantic perspective for the Western Balkan states.

**Keywords:** NATO, Western Balkans, security, enlargement, conditionality, stability, democratization

## Introduction

This article examines the role of NATO enlargement for improving security in the Balkans. It proposes lessons from the experience of some of the new NATO members, which are relevant for countries in the Western Balkans aspiring to join the Euro-Atlantic institutions.<sup>1</sup> After the end of the Cold War, a vigorous debate on the future of NATO ensued in both the academic and policy communities. Neo-realists contended that NATO's days are numbered, while Neo-liberal institutionalists maintained that the Alliance will transform itself to meet the new security challenges. Leading American policy-makers sided with the Neo-liberal institutionalists and argued that, instead of following the Warsaw Pact into the history textbooks, NATO could be the vehicle which can bring stability and enhance security in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> As Liberal Institutionalists argue, the promise of NATO membership was a major incentive for the East Central European countries and helped sustain their political and economic reforms.<sup>3</sup> It could do the same for the Western Balkans as well.

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1 The term "Western Balkans" refers to the following countries: Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. Of these, Albania and Croatia are NATO members since April of 2009.

2 Clinton 1997; Albright 1997, 22; Talbott 1995.

3 Skalnes 1998, 49; Asmus, Kugler and Larrabee 1993, 28–40; Talbott 1995, 27.

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Today much of the Western Balkan region is not truly secure. While it is certainly more stable than it was in the 1990s, the region is not yet fully integrated with Europe. That is why, despite the existing enlargement fatigue in both the EU and NATO, neither Europe nor the US should abandon the Western Balkans so the region does not revert to the politics of nationalism and radicalism. This article confirms that the promise of joining the Euro-Atlantic family has played a significant role in sustaining the economic and political reforms needed for the consolidation of democracy. However, while integration into NATO is perhaps a necessary condition for the Western Balkan countries to become more secure it is not a sufficient one. Furthermore, NATO membership carries costs and risks that should not be neglected. Political leaders advocating joining the Alliance should honestly explain to the citizens the obligations and responsibilities that would come with membership. In addition, the focus should be not only on traditional security issues (i.e., military ones) because the major threats to security are no longer purely military.<sup>4</sup> The problems in the Balkans, such as: persistent state weakness, instability, nationalistic rhetoric, inter-ethnic tensions, economic backwardness, territorial and border disputes, corruption, absence of the rule of law, and others, cannot be solved by NATO alone.

This article revisits the debate on NATO enlargement after several rounds of expansion which saw the inclusion of 12 new members after 1995.<sup>5</sup> This debate needs to be reinvigorated precisely at this time – a time of economic and political uncertainty, which has led to enlargement fatigue, and a time when policy-makers will have to make tough choices and when, yet again, the future of the Balkans and thus Europe itself is in the balance. Arguments and evidence from the Neo-Neo Debate (the debate between Neo-Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism) on the role of institutions can enrich the ongoing policy debates on NATO enlargement.<sup>6</sup>

The following section reviews briefly some of the main arguments from the debate between Realists and Institutionalists as a starting point for the subsequent analysis.

While Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism share some important assumptions (e.g., the international system is anarchic and states are rational self-interested actors), these theories made different predictions about the future of NATO. For Neorealists, alliances (and institutions, in general) are tools for the pursuit of state interests, especially the interests of the more powerful alliance members. Military alliances are usually created as a response to an outside threat. Neo-realists expect that when the threat disappears alliances are likely to dissolve.<sup>7</sup> This logic led scholars sharing the Realist view to predict that the collapse of the Soviet Union would most likely mean the end of NATO as well

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4 There could be no security without stable and effective state institutions or without development.

5 The first accession of new members after the end of the Cold War was in 1999 with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Then Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined. Most recently, Albania and Croatia became NATO members.

6 Baldwin 1993.

7 Jervis 1999, 63; Waltz 1979, 126; Grieco 1988, 46.

because NATO members would no longer be willing to pay the high costs, associated with such an alliance.<sup>8</sup>

Neoliberal Institutionalists were more optimistic about the future of NATO because they argued that states often decide to maintain successful institutions rather than dissolve them or build new ones.<sup>9</sup> NATO was not likely to be dissolved because it was highly institutionalized and also because its member states needed the Alliance for issues beyond defense. Abandoning NATO would risk jeopardizing cooperation on a variety of non-military issues and self-interested actors were unlikely to do that. Neoliberal Institutionalists expected the Alliance to adjust to the new strategic environment and continue to exist.<sup>10</sup> They expected NATO to try to make itself more relevant by incorporating additional roles and missions, such as peace-keeping and peace-making.

How is NATO enlargement explained by Realism and Liberal Institutionalism and which theory is better supported by the evidence? For Realists, the expansion of the Alliance is an attempt to extend Western (and American) sphere of influence beyond its Cold War boundaries and to fill the security vacuum left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They were advocating against enlargement because the majority of them perceived that such an action could be seen as provocative by Russia; it may trigger a security dilemma which could lead to worsening of relations between Moscow and the West and destabilizing Europe rather than making it more secure. From a Neo-liberal Institutionalist perspective, however, NATO enlargement will strengthen the fragile democracies in the Eastern European countries transitioning from an authoritarian rule. It will extend NATO's norms of peaceful conflict resolution to the rest of Europe and, thus, promote security and stability. Liberal Institutionalist supported the expansion of the Alliance because in their view it would help unify and pacify Europe.

Neither Realism nor Liberalism alone can explain the evolution of the Alliance since the end of the Cold War.<sup>11</sup> Both theories' predictions are rather vague and hence, hard to disconfirm.<sup>12</sup> While one of the key Realist predictions about the gradual dissolution of NATO obviously has not come to pass, it is difficult to say that this in and of itself is a big blow to Neo-Realism because Neo-Realists do not specify exactly how long after the disappearance of the threat Alliance dissolve. Furthermore, one version of Neo-Realism – Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat – would not have a big problem explaining the continual existence of NATO because after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new

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8 Costs of military alliances include, for example: loss of full control over a state's decision-making process, expending of precious resources, such as money and human lives, on collective actions that are not necessarily in one's own interest, and others; Hellmann and Wolf 1993, 17; Mearsheimer 1990, 52.

9 Keohane 1984, 1992; Aggarwal 2001.

10 Hellmann and Wolf 1993, 26.

11 Hellmann and Wolf 1993, 26.

12 Skalnes, 1998, 62.

threats appeared that perhaps required NATO to be preserved. While neither theory alone provides a sufficient explanation of developments, both Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberal Institutionalism contribute important competing ideas and perspectives, which enrich our understanding of the evolution of NATO after the demise of the Soviet Union and thus, could help policy-makers make better informed choices.

### **Benefits of NATO Enlargement**

Against objections from the Realist camp, Neoliberal Institutionalists argued that the new NATO can be a part of a broader institutional infrastructure which will promote democracy and stability in a “Europe whole and free, and at peace with itself.” In this view, international institutions could be used “first to encourage and then to lock in domestic political and policy changes in various Eastern European countries.”<sup>13</sup> Or, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated: “Now the new NATO can do for Europe’s east what the old NATO did for Europe’s west: vanquish old hatreds, promote integration, create a secure environment for prosperity, and deter violence in the region where two world wars and the cold-war began.”<sup>14</sup>

Has NATO enlargement promoted democracy and could the alliance help aspiring members in this regard? Neo-liberal institutionalists contend that one very important benefit from NATO enlargement is the consolidation of the fragile democracies of European countries in transition. Embracing Institutional arguments, then President Bill Clinton stated: “By extending the underpinnings of security beyond the arbitrary line of the Cold War, NATO can strengthen democratic and free market reforms for all of Europe, just as it has done for Western Europe in the three decades since 1949.”<sup>15</sup> In this view, democracy is important not merely as a goal in itself but also as a means to peace and security because democracies do not fight with each other, according to the Democratic Peace Theory. Hence, NATO will actually be promoting security if it is able to promote democracy.

Neo-Realists disagree and argue that international institutions have only a limited effect on state behavior and only when the policies they promote are in line with the interests of the most powerful states.<sup>16</sup> They argue that NATO’s primary mission has been deterrence and defense against the Soviet Union (or new threats, after the end of the Cold War) and hence, cannot be expected to be spreading democracy or human rights. Furthermore, democratic reforms in the East Central European countries started in the late 1980s, that is, much before NATO decided to expand. Realists also warn that politicians may sometimes talk the Institutional talk but walk the Realist walk.

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13 Ibid, 49.

14 Albright 1997, 22.

15 Clinton 1997.

16 Mearsheimer 1994/95.

In line with Institutionalist expectations, I find that the prospect of NATO membership has actually served as a carrot and has encouraged and helped sustain the democratic reforms in East Central European countries. It could do the same for the Western Balkan states. NATO conditionality has worked through setting a number of benchmarks and then insisting on countries to reach those benchmarks in order to be rewarded with membership or other benefits. Conditionality could be defined as “the use of fulfillment of stipulated political obligations as a prerequisite for obtaining economic aid, debt relief, most-favored nation status, access to subsidized credit, or membership in coveted regional or global organizations.”<sup>17</sup> In order to achieve membership, aspiring countries are encouraged to strengthen their newly-formed democratic institutions, establish market economies, affirm civilian control over their militaries, respect human rights, and consolidate the rule of law. NATO has been useful in directing and facilitating these reforms.<sup>18</sup> The incentives provided by the Alliance have been particularly important for countries that have had less or no experience with democracy in the past because they lack the technical expertise to design the democratic institutions they want and need. Membership Action Plans (MAPs) and other NATO programs and activities have been very helpful in this regard.

### **Costs of Joining NATO**

However, NATO enlargement is not without its costs – economic, political, and military - for the Alliance and for its potential new members as well. The countries that are currently aspiring to join should take into account the fact that the necessary security sector reforms are certainly not cheap. Restructuring their armed forces and bringing them up to NATO standards will affect the tough budgetary choices policy-makers have to make.<sup>19</sup> SIPRI data on military spending shows that new NATO members actually increased their military expenditures after their accession to the Alliance compared to what they were spending in the years before they became members. (Military spending as a share of GDP has fallen a little but this is because the GDPs of these countries have gone up.) This increased spending has been a function of activities related to their Alliance membership. NATO members are encouraged to keep defense spending at 2% of their GDP although some members spend less. Advocating for NATO has been difficult at times because some of its policies and/or conditions for accession have been fiercely opposed by the publics. In case of Bulgaria and Romania, for example, this was the case with some requirements of the defense reform, including the downsizing of military personnel and equipment. There were sound economic arguments for downsizing of the militaries in this countries and they would have made some of the reforms even had they not been applying for NATO membership. However, the problem is one of timing since

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17 Schmitter 2001, 42.

18 Zagorcheva 2001/02, 228.

19 NATO members are encouraged to keep defense spending at 2% of their GDP although some members spend less.

these measures are very unpopular (because thousands of people are losing their jobs) and this means that the people in power stand to lose a considerable number of votes. Sending troops to peace-keeping missions has also been problematic, especially when there are casualties and the people do not really see how the mission is in a country's national interest. Bulgaria and Romania, among others, have been paying a high price in order to join the Alliance. These include: higher unemployment because of the downsizing of their militaries, higher percent of the GDP spent for defense purposes, high popular dissatisfaction with the sitting government which is perceived as selling out to NATO or American demands. Costs of joining NATO also include the economic losses due to cooperation on NATO missions. Realists have challenged institutionalists on this count, arguing that these reforms, if seen to be in the interest of the East European states, would have been implemented even without NATO or any other international institution. This is not very likely, however, and not because national leaders in these countries did not see the reforms as necessary. They did, but they needed an outside help in order to persuade their publics. Reforms that are unpopular, expensive and painful often lead to the fall of the reformist government. Reformers in East Central Europe needed outside help in order to maintain the momentum for reform and to be able to convince domestic publics that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Another potential cost of joining a military alliance is the increased chance of getting involved in a war. Some Realists have shown that alliances could actually lead to war rather than being instruments of peace.<sup>20</sup> The fact that countries are bound by a treaty to defend an ally who is involved in a conflict can lead to escalation of that conflict with the involvement of new countries who, were it not for their alliance obligations, would have stayed out of the fight. Becoming a NATO member would also mean participating in military missions, some of which are out-of-area, like the current Afghanistan war. Policy-makers have to be prepared to make the case as to why these missions are important and why they are willing to accept casualties in wars that may not necessarily be directly related to these countries' national security interests. "Why are *our* soldiers dying in the *American* wars?" is an often-heard complaint in some European NATO members and policy-makers who advocate membership should have a convincing answer to it. Along the same lines, new East European member states have at times doubted the political will of the US, France, or Germany to make sacrifices on their behalf and defend them, for example, in a conflict against Russia.<sup>21</sup> For example, the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia has stirred very intense discussions about the credibility of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (the commitment to collective defense). Had Georgia been a NATO member, it is debatable whether Russia would have attacked Georgian territory and what the US response would have been in such a situation. Nevertheless, many of the new NATO members (especially Poland and the Baltics) have voiced their concerns that the US/NATO may not be willing to risk a nuclear war in order to defend them from Russia. If members doubt the credibility of Article 5 commitments, the Alliance itself is in trouble.

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20 Christensen and Snyder 1990.

21 Bogdanos 2009; Asmus et al. 2010, 2.

Another potential cost of joining NATO could be deteriorating relations with Russia who continues to oppose further enlargement. Russia feels threatened and isolated by NATO enlargement. It believes it has been marginalized because it is not a member of the alliance and has no say in its decision-making process (except indirectly through the NATO-Russian Council which has consultative functions only). The experience of new NATO members and aspirants shows that Moscow has been willing to play the energy card when it has been displeased with the political direction of its former Communist allies. Russia has cut off natural gas supplies to Georgia, Ukraine, and others several times in the last two-three years. Although Moscow's official explanation is that the reducing of supplies is due to the refusal of these countries to pay a market price, political leaders in those states were convinced this was Russia's attempt to intimidate or even blackmail them into submission.

Russia's persistent opposition to NATO enlargement makes it more difficult for countries that have had close relations with Moscow in the past, like Serbia, and/or are still economically dependent on Russia. Russia supports Serbia's position on Kosovo and this would make it even more difficult for leaders in Belgrade to go against Moscow's wishes. Fortunately, Russia has not been as strongly opposed to NATO enlargement in the case of the Western Balkan countries compared to Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Aware of the need to increase cooperation with Moscow, the Obama Administration started the "Reset Policy", which was followed by NATO's own reset with Moscow. The Alliance's new Strategic Concept reaffirms the importance of developing collaborative relations. Hence, if relations between NATO and Russia continue to improve, the Serbian political elite and the leaders of the other Western Balkan countries would not have to feel split between Brussels and Moscow and can view good relations with NATO and cooperation with Russia as complementary rather than incompatible.

Furthermore, some analysts have argued that because of participation in missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, these countries may become targets of terrorists.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, so far there has been no serious increase in terrorist incidents in the Balkan countries but such threats need to be taken seriously since these countries are very vulnerable to terrorist attacks and do not have the resources to invest in homeland security the way the US and the UK did after the attacks on them.

Regarding the domestic political debates on whether to join the Alliance, the lessons from previous NATO accessions show that policy-makers should be very honest with their citizens about the significant costs of membership in the Alliance. Otherwise,

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22 In April of 2008 General Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of the Russian General Staff, warned that Russia would take military and "other measures" if Ukraine became a NATO member. Then-President Putin said Russia might target nuclear missiles against Ukraine if Kiev agrees to host NATO military bases or participate in the U.S. missile defense project.

23 Mesthos 2010, 14.

they create unrealistic expectations that are impossible to fulfill.<sup>24</sup> When international institutions fail to deliver the “heaven on earth,” promised by local politicians, the publics are severely disappointed and thus the effectiveness of the institutions is compromised. Unfortunately, it has been often the case that the costs of membership are not openly and honestly discussed by policy-makers who are trying to advocate joining NATO. For example, when the Croatian government was making the case in favor of joining the Alliance, it argued that FDI was going to increase in the case of accession. This did not happen – FDI was actually higher in the years before joining NATO than right after that.<sup>25</sup> Usually politicians share with the public only the positive aspects of joining NATO.<sup>26</sup> But such playing loose with the facts may hurt political leaders in the future. If politicians oversell the case in favor of NATO expansion in order to increase public support for it, they end up creating overly high expectations of what the benefits of NATO membership would be. And if the citizens have unrealistically high expectations, they are bound to be disappointed when their country eventually is admitted to the Alliance. Thus, such a strategy would backfire because the politicians would then have to explain why they have promised things that have not materialized.

The effects of the promise of NATO membership are difficult to measure precisely because most of these countries were offered conditional membership in the EU as well. For EU membership, they had to fulfill similar conditions as for NATO membership. Hence, it is very difficult to disentangle the effects of these two similar types of conditionality and to establish whether NATO or EU membership proved to be the stronger motivator for the accomplished reforms.<sup>27</sup> A recent paper finds that the effect of NATO conditionality on institutional change in countries in transition is positive and independent from the effect of EU conditionality.<sup>28</sup> However, evidence on this is still inconclusive. Furthermore, other factors, unrelated to membership in the institutions, played an important role in the democratization processes of these states, namely, the desires of their citizens and the

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24 “High and partly unrealistic expectations toward the EU dominate public opinion, such as that integration into the EU would solve all political and economic problems of the region immediately” (Grimm, 2008: 4). This is not to compare the offer of NATO and EU membership but the fact that many people held unrealistic expectations for both NATO and EU accession and wrongly believed that membership in these institutions in itself will somehow solve many of their problems.

25 Other risks and costs of membership were glossed over as well – e.g., how much the reform of the security sector would cost.

26 Politicians often avoid talking about the obligations that NATO membership implies. According to a cable from US Embassy in Tirana to Washington (released by WikiLeaks), “while Embassy personnel have tried to explain obligations of NATO membership to the Government of Albania interlocutors, the message has not sunk in and certainly has not been passed on to the public.” (U.S. Embassy Tirana, 2008).

27 Although institutions like NATO, the EU, and the OSCE, among others, have different goals and purposes, they are mutually re-enforcing. The expansion of NATO cannot be a substitute for further EU enlargement although the goal of both processes is the building of a broader and deeper security community.

28 Belke et al. 2009.



local political elites who would have pushed for reforms even in the absence of NATO and EU promises to enlarge.

One thing by now is clear, however - the promise of membership matters only if it is credible.<sup>29</sup> If aspiring states do not believe they have a *real* chance to join these institutions, their motivation for reforms would suffer. As Schimmelpfennig and Scholtz convincingly show, “those international organizations that do not offer tangible material or political incentives to the states of the region (such as the Council of Europe or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) have not been effective in promoting democratic change against domestic obstacles.”<sup>30</sup> The openly-expressed dissatisfaction and frustration of the East European countries with the Partnership for Peace Program was based precisely on the fact that the PfP offered neither military assistance in case of an attack, nor membership in the Alliance. That is why critics mocked the PfP as the “Partnership for Postponement” or the “Policy of Procrastination.” The then Estonian President Lennart Meri even compared it to an old bottle of perfume – “it looks enticing, but it’s empty.”<sup>31</sup>

Scholars mainly from the Realist School (John Mearsheimer and Dan Writer, among others) have accused advocates on NATO enlargement of using double standards as far as some of the criteria for inclusion of the Alliance are concerned. They argue that whether a country is a democracy or not has not mattered significantly for admission. What really counts is the strategic significance of that country and the national interests of other NATO members, especially the leading ones. Critics point to the flaws in the quality of democracy in some countries when they have been accepted or to cases where countries have reverted back to a dictatorial regime and have remained NATO members. For example, during the Cold War, NATO admitted Turkey and Greece at a time when neither of them was a fully-fledged democracy but they made for good US allies against the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War, the first three post-Communist states to join (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) were more advanced in their reforms than some of the countries that were admitted in the second round despite their political shortcomings and flawed democracies. The decision on Macedonia’s membership is also a case in point. The country was denied membership because Greece blocked it. This clearly had to do with the name dispute and not with meeting the conditions for membership. In fact, it was pointed out in the official NATO Study that FYROM had met

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29 Schimmelpfennig (2007), among others, argues that only the credible conditional promise of membership has produced compliance with the conditions for joining the Alliance.

30 Schimmelpfennig and Scholtz 2008, 198.

31 Cook 1997.

the technical standards for membership by the 2008 Bucharest Summit.<sup>32</sup> Hence, it could have already become a member had it not been for its dispute with Greece and because of the particular way in which NATO makes decisions – through consensus rather than a majority vote.

As Realists have argued, whether NATO decides to accept a country as a member is ultimately a political decision, not only a technical one – i.e., whether that country meets particular admission criteria. A country's strategic value matters as well. For example, the strategic importance of Bulgaria and Romania was demonstrated when the US started its war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003, when Washington needed the territory and the air space of these countries to fly over. Another political consideration has been Russia's position, although NATO members and Russia herself would vehemently deny that Moscow has anything close to a veto on NATO's decisions to accept new members. However, Russia's newly found assertiveness on the international stage, not to mention its August 2008 war with Georgia, have certainly affected how NATO thinks about Ukraine's and Georgia's chances to become members, regardless of the official declarations

Often, EU membership is said to be better in order to achieve all of the potential benefits of NATO membership. This claim may sound exaggerated to some – after all, the EU has no military force of its own and could hardly guarantee a state's security. At the same time, however, it could be argued that it is unlikely that NATO would not intervene when a EU member is under attack. On a more practical note, the argument that aspiring members to NATO should rather join the EU is somewhat disingenuous, having in mind that EU membership is more difficult to achieve and that EU enlargement fatigue may make it difficult to join for quite some time to come. In many cases, it was precisely because in the mid to late 1990s, EU membership was not an option at all, that East European countries wanted to join NATO, as their only way of becoming a part of free and democratic Europe. The decision to enlarge NATO in comparison to the EU “seemed easier and cheaper.”<sup>33</sup> As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote, “the security NATO provides should not have to wait until tomato farmers in Central Europe start using the right kinds of pesticides.”<sup>34</sup>

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32 A NATO report from the Bucharest Summit states: “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has, like Albania and Croatia, been participating in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for a number of years to prepare for possible membership. At Bucharest, Allied leaders agreed to invite the country to become a member as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the issue over the country's name has been reached with Greece.”

NATO, “NATO Enlargement,” available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49212.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm); See also, Metodija A. Koloski, “The Case For Macedonia,” Foreign Policy Association, March 12, 2009; At: [http://www.fpa.org/topics\\_info2414/topics\\_info\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=853200](http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=853200); (NATO 2008a, 2008b.)

33 Skalnes 1998, 50; See also: Economist 31 may 1997, 13-15; Atkinson and Pomfret 1995, A16.

34 Albright 1997, 22.

Realists challenge the argument about the significance of NATO for accomplishing the democratic reforms in the countries in transition. They also state that the enlargement process was based primarily on the strategic interests of the U.S. and other current NATO members and not so much on the idea of spreading common values.<sup>35</sup> Expansion was supported by the United States because it was in its own self-interest – enlargement would maintain American leadership in NATO and keep the US involved in Europe.<sup>36</sup>

Realists see confirmation for their arguments in the developments after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the resulting change in the threat environment. 9/11 changed the pace of enlargement as well. Neo-realists usually explain the “Big Bang” enlargement with the increased strategic importance of the Black Sea and President George W. Bush’s post-9/11 necessity to connect geographically NATO’s European members with Turkey and Greece. As Peter Fin wrote, as a result of 9/11, Bulgaria and Romania “have been catapulted into serious consideration for [NATO] membership.”<sup>37</sup> Neo-Realists argue that enlargement to the Balkans was squarely in the interest of NATO and the US. The Alliance’s goal was to shape the environment in the Balkans in a way that it would not have to intervene there to solve conflicts and to pay for such interventions with the lives of its own soldiers. In the words of then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, “The very promise of a larger NATO made Europe more stable by giving aspiring allies an incentive to solve their own problems. *This is the kind of progress that can ensure outside powers are never again dragged into conflict in Central and Eastern Europe.*”<sup>38</sup> Such arguments would be fully consistent with Neo-Realist theory. At the same time, they would be consistent with NeoLiberal Institutionalism as well since it also assumes that states are self-interested actors whose behavior is influenced by cost-benefit calculations. This is not really surprising because, as mentioned earlier, both theories make some similar assumptions about the drivers of states’ behavior in international relations and, hence, not all of their predictions are substantially different and/or mutually exclusive.

Along the same lines, realists ask, what was the selection process based on – were countries chosen to join NATO because of the quality of their democratic reforms and how successfully they were meeting the enlargement criteria or was the choice of new members made based on the strategic interests of the Alliance and its more powerful members? Neo-realists argue that granting MAP and admitting a country as a member is a political decision and not merely a technical one – i.e., deciding whether that country meets the criteria for enlargement. They stress that the requirements for membership are written in a language that is deliberately imprecise and could be interpreted in more than one ways. Because of that, whether a country has complied or not with these requirements and to what extent its reforms have been successful becomes a matter of wide discretion, depending on the circumstances and the interests of the member states.

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35 Reiter 2001.

36 Holbrooke 1995.

37 Fin 2002.

38 Albright 1998, 21.

Rainer Schweickert *et al.* have found some evidence to support such claims. In a recent paper they show that “the granting of MAP or entry into NATO is rather independent from institutional reforms and depends on strategic factors, i.e., good relations with NATO member countries and especially, the US. Also, being a NATO neighbor country increases the probability of an early NATO or MAP entry as this allows territorial integrity of the NATO area in case of enlargement.”<sup>39</sup> However, these two motivations (the Realist and the Institutionalist) are not mutually exclusive and policy-makers are often driven simultaneously by both.

Neo-Realists argue that the mechanism of conditionality on which democratic reforms are based confirms their theory because conditionality itself ultimately depends on the balance of power. They maintain that international institutions merely reflect existing balances of economic and military power and, as such, they favor the interests of the big and powerful states.<sup>40</sup> From the very beginning of the expansion process, NATO’s conditionality has reflected the power asymmetries between the West (and especially the United States) and the East European aspirants. The requirements for accession were not negotiated between the Alliance and aspiring countries. It was NATO alone who set the conditions for enlargement and the applicants simply had to comply with them.<sup>41</sup> Hence, while Realists do not deny that conditionality may have been successful and numerous reforms have been accomplished, they merely claim that this was due to the superior bargaining power of the US and Western European allies, and not to institutional effects. The US and existing members used NATO as a vehicle for their interests, which they managed to impose because of their superior power (This does not mean that the conditions for membership and the reforms were not in the interest of the aspiring members as well. Many of them actually were and perhaps these states were going to implement them even without outside pressure.).

The conditions for accession to NATO require potential members to pursue good neighborly relations and settle territorial disputes peacefully. On this count, the evidence supports Institutionalism. Previous rounds of enlargement showed that aspiring countries were quick to understand that membership in NATO depended, in part, on the way they solve conflicts with their neighbors. In the words of then Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn: “Simply put, neither the European Union nor NATO is willing to admit states which have contentious border issues, unsettled minority problems, and the like.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, Slovakia and Hungary formerly renounced any territorial claims during the signing of their treaty of good neighborliness.<sup>43</sup> As Mark Webber correctly notes, “meeting

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39 Schweickert, Melnykowska and Heitmann 2011, 13-14.

40 Mearsheimer 1994/95.

41 Schimmelfennig 2000b.

42 The then-Slovak Foreign Minister made an identical statement: “We know very well that the precondition for NATO membership is the settlement of disputes with neighboring countries.”, Holbrooke 1995.

43 Skalnes 1998, 55.

NATO requirements has had a discernible impact on a number of cases. These include the improvement of Bulgaria's strained relations with neighboring Romania and Turkey, and reconciliation between Romania and Hungary.<sup>44</sup> The Hungarian-Romanian Treaty, for example, accepted the 1920 borders; Hungary dropped its demands for autonomy of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Transylvania while Romania promised to protect minority rights. When Bulgaria and Romania, for example, were trying to prove they were worthy of membership, they decided to show that they could be security providers, and not only security consumers. They knew that NATO values states that could contribute to solving disputes within the Alliance peacefully and that is why they participated in trilateral meetings with Greece and Turkey on the improvement of the Greek-Turkish relations. The conflict between Greece and Turkey itself is also a case in point. While the animosity between the two countries has not disappeared, their membership in the Alliance has most probably prevented them from going to open warfare.<sup>45</sup> One can find supportive evidence for the arguments of Institutionalists and other advocates of enlargement in the case of the Western Balkans too. For example, after Montenegro split from Serbia and decided seriously to pursue NATO membership, the country has made substantial progress and has also contributed to regional cooperation. Montenegro has also participated in EU and NATO peace-keeping exercises and its troops are serving in the ISAF. NATO conditionality in this case has motivated and helped Podgorica to establish rule of law, fight corruption more vigorously, and enhance the effectiveness of its newly-formed democratic institutions.<sup>46</sup>

Another benefit of joining NATO is related to the perception that, in this way, a state becomes a part of a wealthy and prosperous community built on the values of liberty and the rule of law. Becoming a NATO member is believed to increase the prestige of a country. Joining such an elite club would help increase a country's credit rating and thus, bolster Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The evidence on this issue is inconclusive. In Bulgaria and Romania, for example, FDI did increase after joining NATO but research shows that there are other factors that significantly affect FDI, including: property rights enforcement, reduced corruption, greater political stability, trade openness, etc. In many of the new NATO members, subsequent EU membership also contributed to the boost in FDI. Some scholars find a positive correlation between NATO membership and FDI but

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44 Webber 2011, 144.

45 However, NATO's record on this count is certainly not perfect. The Alliance's involvement in the Balkans has not alleviated some of the key sources of conflict in the region. For example, despite diplomatic pressure from the United States and other NATO members, Greece and FYROM have not moved any closer to settling their dispute on the name of FYROM, in: Talbott 1995, 4.

46 Montenegro's efforts have been rewarded with an invitation to join the Membership Action Plan in 2009.

only U.S. FDI.<sup>47</sup> Advocates of NATO enlargement maintain that NATO membership is a step toward EU membership. The East Central European states became NATO members and now all of them are EU members as well. Same is hoped for the Western Balkan countries. However, circumstances have changed and this does not have to be the case anymore. Policy-makers should not take it for granted that if they manage to join NATO, not long after that an EU membership would be offered.<sup>48</sup> The economic and financial crisis, coupled with enlargement fatigue in many of the EU members, makes such a scenario much less likely than for countries that joined NATO in earlier rounds. Mainly due to the events on 9/11 and subsequent developments, the US has shifted its interest and attention away from the Balkans. US attention and resources have been focused primarily on the Middle East and China. The EU may also lack the political will and the capacity to revitalize the economy and/or provide security for the region on its own. The on-going Greek crisis is a case in point.

### Costs of Joining NATO

However, NATO enlargement is not without its costs – economic, political, and military – for the Alliance and for its potential new members as well. The countries that are currently aspiring to join should take into account the fact that the necessary security sector reforms are certainly not cheap. Restructuring their armed forces and bringing them up to NATO standards will affect the tough budgetary choices policy-makers have to make.<sup>49</sup> SIPRI data on military spending shows that new NATO members actually increased their military expenditures after their accession to the Alliance compared to what they were spending in the years before they became members (Military spending as a share of GDP has fallen a little but this is because the GDPs of these countries have gone up). This increased spending has been a function of activities related to their Alliance membership. NATO members are encouraged to keep defense spending at two per cent of their GDP although some members spend less. Advocating for NATO has been difficult at times because some of its policies and/or conditions for accession have been fiercely opposed by the publics. In case of Bulgaria and Romania, for example, this was the case with some requirements of the defense reform, including the downsizing of military personnel and equipment. There were sound economic arguments for downsizing of the

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47 They explain that countries that have defense alliances with the US attract more American FDI because “Defense alliances provide a credibility signal for investors. A defensive alliance indicates a political relationship between the host country and the US government that greatly reduces the chances of the host country interfering with US investments. Defensive alliances are likely to be an important indicator to American investors of the relative security of their investments in any particular country”, Biglaiser and Derouen 2005, 16.

48 Allegedly, Albanian politicians did just that and it cost them dearly. US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks suggest that, after achieving NATO membership, Albanian leaders took EU accession for granted and failed to make sufficient progress in implementing the necessary steps to curb corruption and organized crime.

49 NATO members are encouraged to keep defense spending at two per cent of their GDP although some members spend less.

militaries in these countries and they would have made some of the reforms even had they not been applying for NATO membership. However, the problem is one of timing since these measures are very unpopular (because thousands of people are losing their jobs) and this means that the people in power stand to lose a considerable number of votes. Sending troops to peace-keeping missions has also been problematic, especially when there are casualties and the people do not really see how the mission is in a country's national interest. Bulgaria and Romania, among others, have been paying a high price in order to join the Alliance. These include: higher unemployment because of the downsizing of their militaries, higher percent of the GDP spent for defense purposes, high popular dissatisfaction with the sitting government which is perceived as selling out to NATO or American demands. Costs of joining NATO also include the economic losses due to cooperation on NATO missions. Realists have challenged institutionalists on this count, arguing that these reforms, if seen to be in the interest of the East European states, would have been implemented even without NATO or any other international institution. This is not very likely, however, and not because national leaders in these countries did not see the reforms as necessary. They did, but they needed an outside help in order to persuade their publics. Reforms that are unpopular, expensive and painful often lead to the fall of the reformist government. Reformers in East Central Europe needed outside help in order to maintain the momentum for reform and to be able to convince domestic publics that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Another potential cost of joining a military alliance is the increased chance of getting involved in a war. Some Realists have shown that alliances could actually lead to war rather than being instruments of peace.<sup>50</sup> The fact that countries are bound by a treaty to defend an ally who is involved in a conflict can lead to escalation of that conflict with the involvement of new countries who, were it not for their alliance obligations, would have stayed out of the fight. Becoming a NATO member would also mean participating in military missions, some of which are out-of-area, like the current Afghanistan war. Policy-makers have to be prepared to make the case as to why these missions are important and why they are willing to accept casualties in wars that may not necessarily be directly related to these countries' national security interests. "Why are *our* soldiers dying in the *American* wars?" is an often-heard complaint in some European NATO members and policy-makers who advocate membership should have a convincing answer to it. Along the same lines, new East European member states have at times doubted the political will of the US, France, or Germany to make sacrifices on their behalf and defend them, for example, in a conflict against Russia.<sup>51</sup> For example, the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia has stirred very intense discussions about the credibility of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (the commitment to collective defense). Had Georgia been a NATO member, it is debatable whether Russia would have attacked Georgian territory and what the US response would have been in such a situation. Nevertheless, many of the new NATO members (especially Poland and the Baltics) have voiced their concerns that the

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50 Christensen and Snyder 1990.

51 Bogdanos 2009; Asmus et al. 2010, 2.

US/NATO may not be willing to risk a nuclear war in order to defend them from Russia. If members doubt the credibility of Article 5 commitments, the Alliance itself is in trouble.

Another potential cost of joining NATO could be deteriorating relations with Russia who continues to oppose further enlargement. Russia feels threatened and isolated by NATO enlargement. It believes it has been marginalized because it is not a member of the alliance and has no say in its decision-making process (except indirectly through the NATO-Russian Council which has consultative functions only). The experience of new NATO members and aspirants shows that Moscow has been willing to play the energy card when it has been displeased with the political direction of its former Communist allies. Russia has cut off natural gas supplies to Georgia, Ukraine, and others several times in the last two-three years. Although Moscow's official explanation is that the reducing of supplies is due to the refusal of these countries to pay a market price, political leaders in those states were convinced this was Russia's attempt to intimidate or even blackmail them into submission.

Russia's persistent opposition to NATO enlargement makes it more difficult for countries that have had close relations with Moscow in the past, like Serbia, and/or are still economically dependent on Russia. Russia supports Serbia's position on Kosovo and this would make it even more difficult for leaders in Belgrade to go against Moscow's wishes. Fortunately, Russia has not been as strongly opposed to NATO enlargement in the case of the Western Balkan countries compared to Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>52</sup> Aware of the need to increase cooperation with Moscow, the Obama Administration started the "Reset Policy", which was followed by NATO's own reset with Moscow. The Alliance's new Strategic Concept reaffirms the importance of developing collaborative relations. Hence, if relations between NATO and Russia continue to improve, the Serbian political elite and the leaders of the other Western Balkan countries would not have to feel split between Brussels and Moscow and can view good relations with NATO and cooperation with Russia as complementary rather than incompatible.

Furthermore, some analysts have argued that because of participation in missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, these countries may become targets of terrorists.<sup>53</sup> Fortunately, so far there has been no serious increase in terrorist incidents in the Balkan countries but such threats need to be taken seriously since these countries are very vulnerable to terrorist attacks and do not have the resources to invest in homeland security the way the US and the UK did after the attacks on them.

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52 In April of 2008 General Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of the Russian General Staff, warned that Russia would take military and "other measures" if Ukraine became a NATO member. Then-President Putin said Russia might target nuclear missiles against Ukraine if Kiev agrees to host NATO military bases or participate in the U.S. missile defense project.

53 Mesthos 2010, 14.



Regarding the domestic political debates on whether to join the Alliance, the lessons from previous NATO accessions show that policy-makers should be very honest with their citizens about the significant costs of membership in the Alliance. Otherwise, they create unrealistic expectations that are impossible to fulfill.<sup>54</sup> When international institutions fail to deliver the “heaven on earth,” promised by local politicians, the publics are severely disappointed and thus the effectiveness of the institutions is compromised. Unfortunately, it has been often the case that the costs of membership are not openly and honestly discussed by policy-makers who are trying to advocate joining NATO. For example, when the Croatian government was making the case in favor of joining the Alliance, it argued that FDI was going to increase in the case of accession. This did not happen – FDI was actually higher in the years before joining NATO than right after that.<sup>55</sup> Usually politicians share with the public only the positive aspects of joining NATO.<sup>56</sup> But such playing loose with the facts may hurt political leaders in the future. If politicians oversell the case in favor of NATO expansion in order to increase public support for it, they end up creating overly high expectations of what the benefits of NATO membership would be. And if the citizens have unrealistically high expectations, they are bound to be disappointed when their country eventually is admitted to the Alliance. Thus, such a strategy would backfire because the politicians would then have to explain why they have promised things that have not materialized.

The effects of the promise of NATO membership are difficult to measure precisely because most of these countries were offered conditional membership in the EU as well. For EU membership, they had to fulfill similar conditions as for NATO membership. Hence, it is very difficult to disentangle the effects of these two similar types of conditionality and to establish whether NATO or EU membership proved to be the stronger motivator for the accomplished reforms.<sup>57</sup> A recent paper finds that the effect of NATO conditionality on institutional change in countries in transition is positive and independent from the effect of EU conditionality.<sup>58</sup> However, evidence on this is still inconclusive. Furthermore,

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54 “High and partly unrealistic expectations toward the EU dominate public opinion, such as that integration into the EU would solve all political and economic problems of the region immediately” (Grimm, 2008: 4). This is not to compare the offer of NATO and EU membership but the fact that many people held unrealistic expectations for both NATO and EU accession and wrongly believed that membership in these institutions in itself will somehow solve many of their problems.

55 Other risks and costs of membership were glossed over as well – e.g., how much the reform of the security sector would cost.

56 Politicians often avoid talking about the obligations that NATO membership implies. According to a cable from US Embassy in Tirana to Washington (released by WikiLeaks), “while Embassy personnel have tried to explain obligations of NATO membership to the Government of Albania interlocutors, the message has not sunk in and certainly has not been passed on to the public.” (U.S. Embassy Tirana, 2008).

57 Although institutions like NATO, the EU, and the OSCE, among others, have different goals and purposes, they are mutually re-enforcing. The expansion of NATO cannot be a substitute for further EU enlargement although the goal of both processes is the building of a broader and deeper security community.

58 Belke et al. 2009.

other factors, unrelated to membership in the institutions, played an important role in the democratization processes of these states, namely, the desires of their citizens and the local political elites who would have pushed for reforms even in the absence of NATO and EU promises to enlarge.

One thing by now is clear, however – the promise of membership matters only if it is credible.<sup>59</sup> If aspiring states do not believe they have a *real* chance to join these institutions, their motivation for reforms would suffer. As Schimmelfennig and Scholtz convincingly show, “those international organizations that do not offer tangible material or political incentives to the states of the region (such as the Council of Europe or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) have not been effective in promoting democratic change against domestic obstacles.”<sup>60</sup> The openly-expressed dissatisfaction and frustration of the East European countries with the Partnership for Peace Program was based precisely on the fact that the PfP offered neither military assistance in case of an attack, nor membership in the Alliance. That is why critics mocked the PfP as the “Partnership for Postponement” or the “Policy of Procrastination.” The then Estonian President Lennart Meri even compared it to an old bottle of perfume – “it looks enticing, but it’s empty.”<sup>61</sup>

Scholars mainly from the Realist School (John Mearsheimer and Dan Writer, among others) have accused advocates on NATO enlargement of using double standards as far as some of the criteria for inclusion of the Alliance are concerned. They argue that whether a country is a democracy or not has not mattered significantly for admission. What really counts is the strategic significance of that country and the national interests of other NATO members, especially the leading ones. Critics point to the flaws in the quality of democracy in some countries when they have been accepted or to cases where countries have reverted back to a dictatorial regime and have remained NATO members. For example, during the Cold War, NATO admitted Turkey and Greece at a time when neither of them was a fully-fledged democracy but they made for good US allies against the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War, the first three post-Communist states to join (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) were more advanced in their reforms than some of the countries that were admitted in the second round despite their political shortcomings and flawed democracies. The decision on Macedonia’s membership is also a case in point. The country was denied membership because Greece blocked it. This clearly had to do with the name dispute and not with meeting the conditions for membership. In fact, it was pointed out in the official NATO Study that FYROM had met

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59 Schimmelfennig (2007), among others, argues that only the credible conditional promise of membership has produced compliance with the conditions for joining the Alliance.

60 Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008, 198.

61 Cook 1997.

the technical standards for membership by the 2008 Bucharest Summit.<sup>62</sup> Hence, it could have already become a member had it not been for its dispute with Greece and because of the particular way in which NATO makes decisions – through consensus rather than a majority vote.

As Realists have argued, whether NATO decides to accept a country as a member is ultimately a political decision, not only a technical one – i.e., whether that country meets particular admission criteria. A country's strategic value matters as well. For example, the strategic importance of Bulgaria and Romania was demonstrated when the US started its war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003, when Washington needed the territory and the air space of these countries to fly over. Another political consideration has been Russia's position, although NATO members and Russia herself would vehemently deny that Moscow has anything close to a veto on NATO's decisions to accept new members. However, Russia's newly found assertiveness on the international stage, not to mention its August 2008 war with Georgia, have certainly affected how NATO thinks about Ukraine's and Georgia's chances to become members, regardless of the official declarations.

Often, EU membership is said to be better in order to achieve all of the potential benefits of NATO membership. This claim may sound exaggerated to some – after all, the EU has no military force of its own and could hardly guarantee a state's security. At the same time, however, it could be argued that it is unlikely that NATO would not intervene when a EU member is under attack. On a more practical note, the argument that aspiring members to NATO should rather join the EU is somewhat disingenuous, having in mind that EU membership is more difficult to achieve and that EU enlargement fatigue may make it difficult to join for quite some time to come. In many cases, it was precisely because in the mid to late 1990s, EU membership was not an option at all, that East European countries wanted to join NATO, as their only way of becoming a part of free and democratic Europe. The decision to enlarge NATO in comparison to the EU “seemed easier and cheaper.”<sup>63</sup> As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote, “the security NATO provides should not have to wait until tomato farmers in Central Europe start using the right kinds of pesticides.”<sup>64</sup>

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62 A NATO report from the Bucharest Summit states: “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has, like Albania and Croatia, been participating in the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for a number of years to prepare for possible membership. At Bucharest, Allied leaders agreed to invite the country to become a member as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the issue over the country's name has been reached with Greece.” NATO, “NATO Enlargement,” available at: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49212.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm); See also, Metodija A. Koloski, “The Case For Macedonia,” Foreign Policy Association, March 12, 2009; At: [http://www.fpa.org/topics\\_info2414/topics\\_info\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=853200](http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=853200), NATO 2008a, 2008b.

63 Skalnes 1998, 50; See also: Economist 31 may 1997, 13-15; Atkinson and Pomfret 1995, A16.

64 Albright 1997, 22.

## Conclusion

NATO has rightly been credited with helping to solve some difficult problems in the region and for having contributed to democratization and stability. However, some of its actions in the Balkans have been controversial (e.g., the 1999 Kosovo air campaign) and they have had lasting consequences. More importantly, however, is to continue the debate about the issues for which NATO would still be relevant in the future. The instability in Kosovo, BiH, and Macedonia would make it desirable for a political-military alliance to keep its attention on the region. At the same time, the traditional military threats are becoming fewer and fewer, while NATO may be less relevant for some of the new threats and challenges facing the Balkans. Problems such as weak and ineffective or corrupt state institutions, ethnic divides, economic backwardness and others could not be solved by NATO alone and require the assistance of other institutions better tailored to these tasks.

Regardless of the many arguments of critics against new rounds of enlargement, it is clear that the political elites in NATO and in aspiring countries are determined to continue and new membership offers are only a matter of time. If this is the case, the debate should focus on how to minimize the risks and the costs associated with accepting new members, both to them and to the Alliance. Also, if membership becomes less realistic in the short term, then policy-makers need to think on how to enhance the quality of relations *short of membership* in order to compensate the states that would be left out and not to cut their incentives to continue the reforms. Most of the European leaders are more hopeful today that with the help of institutions like NATO and the EU the Western Balkans can also become a peaceful, stable and secure region and this historic opportunity should not be missed.

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