

Hitting the ‘stop’ button on NATO expansion

By Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan

The United States has consistently advocated NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. In spring 2008 the George W. Bush administration pushed for Membership Action Plans—the path to membership, for both nations. Our core NATO allies, with Germany and France leading the way, blocked the effort, a move that in retrospect might have prevented August’s dustup between Russia and Georgia from escalating into a nuclear standoff.

Russia’s move into Georgia provoked an outpouring of American outrage. Then-candidate Barack Obama came out in favor of NATO accession for both nations, along with the bulk of the American foreign policy establishment. Obama’s support was based on the idea that bringing Georgia into NATO “in no way threatens the legitimate defense interests of Georgia’s neighbors.”

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin saw things differently. In August, as *The New York Times* reported, Putin made his case plainly:

Russia viewed “the appearance of a powerful military bloc” on its borders “as a direct threat” to its security. “The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice,” Mr. Putin said. “National security is not based on promises.”

Complicating matters further, on its way out the door the Bush administration heightened the U.S. commitment to the protection of Ukraine and Georgia. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed “Charters on Strategic Partnership” with both countries, pledging to “support [both countries’] sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders.” The charters are not treaties, and therefore have no legal authority. But along with U.S. support for these nations’ accession to NATO, this sort of language might convince them that Americans will shield them from Russia, encouraging behavior that forces us either to renege on the pledges or face down Russia. An even vaguer commitment seems to have convinced Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili that the U.S. would protect him from Russia last summer, heightening his recklessness.

The story U.S. analysts tell to justify another round of NATO expansion is that Russia—fueled by energy wealth and Vladimir Putin—has reinvigorated its economy, cast off any pretenses of democracy and repaired its military. According to this scenario, Moscow is now poised to overrun its democratic neighbors and reclaim the Soviet empire, all the while gathering energy supplies to use to blackmail Western clients. Hitler and Stalin taught us that aggressors must be stopped early, so it follows that we must now contain Russia by extending security guarantees to its neighbors.

This narrative is devoid of strategic logic. Leaving aside nuclear weapons, which deterrence renders unusable, Russia is not a great power, and is incapable of threatening Western Europe, let alone the United States. The World Bank predicts that Russia’s economy will shrink by 4.5 percent this year, and its unemployment will hit 12 percent. Even close to the height of oil prices, Russia possessed a GDP only roughly

equivalent to that of Italy and Portugal combined. Its stock market is down by more than half since this time last year. Its defense spending totals about \$70 billion annually (less than what the U.S. spends on defense research and investment alone), for what remains a second-rate military.

This is a country strong enough to pummel weak neighbors like Georgia, but one that shouldn't worry Europe, which spends roughly four times more. Balance of power theory tells us that if Russia grows more threatening, the members of the European Union—now collectively richer than the U.S.—will respond by investing more on defense than their current average of 2 percent of GDP, and by further integrating their military capacity.

No longer driven by a revolutionary ideology, Russia also lacks the Soviet Union's ambitions. True, Russia does not like the democratic governments on its flanks in Ukraine and Georgia. But that is because these governments are pursuing policies that anger Russia, not because they are democratic per se. What Russia wants are pliant neighbors. That desire is typical of relatively powerful states: The long U.S. history of violent interventions in Latin America undermines whatever lectures we might direct at Moscow.

Now compare today's security situation to the one that caused NATO's formation in 1949. The Soviets had at least 700,000 troops deemed capable of overrunning a Western Europe left vulnerable by broken armies and empty treasuries. European poverty gave Moscow-backed Communist parties a realistic chance at taking power democratically. Fearing that the Soviet Union—by conquest or revolution—could seize enough of Europe's industrial might to threaten the U.S., Americans sent aid via the Marshall Plan and troops via NATO. U.S. intervention restored the balance of power, serving its own interests.

No similar rationale justifies defending Georgia and Ukraine. In fact, allying with these countries simply creates defense liabilities for NATO members. Alliances are not free. Credible defense commitments require spending and troops, particularly to defend long borders like Ukraine's. With much of NATO's manpower tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan, new commitments may require new recruits, an expensive proposition in an era when the cost of military manpower is quickly appreciating.

These are precisely the sorts of allies a prudent superpower would avoid. They offer few benefits, and come carrying pre-existing territorial conflicts with a stronger neighbor. Ukraine appears to be living up to its reputation for political instability, dangerously verging on the precipice of collapse in the wake of the global financial meltdown. Moreover, a recent poll indicated that 63 percent of Ukrainians do not even want NATO membership. Georgia currently has Russian troops on its territory and is run by a leader with a demonstrated capacity for recklessness. NATO backing will only encourage him.

The benefits of expanding NATO to Ukraine and Georgia are uncertain. Some argue that NATO needs to defend Georgia's gas and oil pipelines. The fear is that the more supply Russia controls, the more it can coerce Europeans by threatening to shut off their power. This analysis ignores the simple fact that energy suppliers also depend on consumers. The oil and gas sector accounted for about two-thirds of Russia's export revenues in 2007, according to the World Bank. That makes it hard to shut off supply, or credibly threaten to do so. Supply threats are more likely drive buyers to invest in new energy sources like liquefied natural gas than to curry Russian favor.

The good news is that President Obama seems likely to silently renounce his prior support for further NATO expansion at the forthcoming NATO summit. This move is wise. But he ought to reconsider NATO expansion more generally. No less a Russia expert than George F. Kennan warned in 1997 that it would constitute the “most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era,” because it would inflame Russian militarism, stifle democracy, and generally “impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

It is past time to cast aside the ideology that promoted NATO expansion in the first place. With a \$530 billion non-war defense budget, two indefinite wars underway, and a financial meltdown at home, Washington needs to stop pretending that every foreign squabble requires American intervention. Russia is not about to march west. Our European friends can defend themselves if we force them to try. As for those, like Georgia and Ukraine, who face different dilemmas, our sympathy for their struggles does not mean we should make them our own.