

CATO HANDBOOK FOR CONGRESS

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 108TH CONGRESS

CATO
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Washington, D.C.

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51. Policy toward NATO

Congress should

- refuse to appropriate funds for any “out-of-area” NATO military missions;
- oppose any further expansion of the alliance;
- recognize that the growing gap between the military capabilities of U.S. forces and those of the European members makes NATO increasingly less useful for significant military operations;
- recognize that NATO has little relevance in the war against America’s terrorist adversaries;
- pass a joint resolution endorsing the new European Security and Defense Policy;
- pass legislation requiring the withdrawal of all U.S. forces stationed in Europe by 2005; and
- conduct a comprehensive debate about whether continued U.S. membership in NATO serves American interests—especially in light of the alliance’s change of focus from territorial defense to murky peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention missions.

Ever since the end of its Cold War mission in the early 1990s, NATO has sought to reinvent itself and remain relevant to Europe’s new security environment. The latest effort has been to take on the mission against terrorism. That is likely to work no better than the previous campaign to turn the alliance into a crisis-management organization to deal with turmoil in the Balkans and other turbulent regions. Try as they may, NATO partisans cannot escape the reality that the alliance is a Cold War institution that is not well suited to address the security problems of the 21st century.

The admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to NATO in 1999 was a watershed event. It wasn’t merely that the alliance was

enlarged; that had occurred before. But for the first time NATO undertook security responsibilities in Central and Eastern Europe. There also appear to be no discernible limits to the potential enlargement of the alliance. Indeed, NATO is now poised to invite the Baltic republics and other East European nations to join.

While NATO contemplates enlarging its membership even further, another equally momentous change has taken place in the alliance. When NATO was first established in 1949, it was explicitly an alliance to defend the territorial integrity of its member states. Indeed, the North Atlantic Treaty contained a provision describing the region to be covered, lest there be any implication that the United States was undertaking the protection of the colonial holdings of its new West European allies.

NATO forces never fired a shot in anger during the Cold War, and the alliance's first military operation did not involve the defense of a member from attack. Instead, that initial mission took place in Bosnia, with NATO aircraft bombing Bosnian Serb positions and the alliance trying to prop up the Muslim-dominated government in Sarajevo. Later, NATO took responsibility for implementing the Dayton Accords by deploying a peace-keeping contingent in Bosnia, where it remains to this day. Then, in 1999, the alliance launched an attack on Yugoslavia for Belgrade's conduct in one of its own provinces: Kosovo.

Surprisingly few people in the United States or Western Europe pointed out that the Bosnia and Kosovo missions were a stark departure from NATO's original purpose or questioned whether they were authorized under the provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty. Yet the Serbs never attacked or even threatened to attack a NATO member. Sending NATO troops on such "out-of-area" missions was a dramatic transformation of the alliance's rationale. But the treaty has never been amended, nor has such a change been debated by Congress or the parliaments of the other NATO members.

Some thoughtful members of Congress and experts in the foreign policy community have raised questions about the implications of the expansion of NATO's membership and the transformation of NATO's purpose, however. The two innovations are closely linked, and there are ample reasons to be worried about both of them.

Many proponents of enlargement insist that a new NATO—something more akin to a Euro-Atlantic collective security organization than to a traditional military alliance—is evolving. U.S. policymakers are apparently attempting to create a weird hybrid entity—part traditional alliance and part collective security organization.

The American people are likely to end up with the worst of both worlds: a NATO that periodically becomes entangled in messy, Bosnia-style peace-keeping missions and Kosovo-style military interventions involving disputes that have little, if any, relevance to vital American interests and a NATO that is obligated to protect the alliance's new members in Central and Eastern Europe if a threat by one of their neighbors—including their great-power neighbor, Russia—ever emerges.

Both scenarios are worrisome. There is little doubt that many NATO supporters see the Bosnia and Kosovo interventions as a model for future NATO enterprises. Indeed, the transformation of NATO's focus has been both breathtaking and alarming. It was once an alliance to keep Western Europe—a major strategic and economic prize—out of the orbit of an aggressively expansionist superpower, the Soviet Union. It has now become the babysitter of the Balkans.

The Dangers of the "New Nato"

As the leader of the "new NATO," the United States is incurring expensive and thankless responsibilities. The Bosnia mission has already cost American taxpayers nearly \$20 billion, and the meter is still running. The ongoing intervention in Kosovo is running another \$3 billion a year, and the lives of American military personnel will be at risk there for years to come. Yet even the out-of-area adventures in the Balkans do not fully satisfy the ambitions of some "new NATO" enthusiasts. Former secretary of state Warren Christopher and former secretary of defense William Perry suggest that the alliance become an instrument for the projection of force anywhere in the world "Western interests" are threatened. In a moment of exuberance, then-secretary of state Madeleine Albright stated that NATO should be prepared to deal with unpleasant developments "from the Middle East to Central Africa." NATO officials have shown increasing interest in the security problems of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The prospect of U.S. and other NATO troops being used as armed social workers in vague out-of-area crusades is bad enough, but the other scenario is equally troubling. For all the propaganda about the "new NATO" and its more political orientation, NATO remains a military alliance that is obliged to protect its members from armed attack from any source. As NATO incorporates the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, that obligation could entangle the United States in parochial disputes involving a new member and one of its neighbors. Alliance obligations might even put the United States in the middle of a conflict

between two NATO members—something that Washington already frets about because of the bad blood between Greece and Turkey.

Most ominous of all, Russia has important strategic, economic, and cultural interests throughout much of Eastern Europe going back generations and, in some cases, centuries. Extending security commitments to nations in what Moscow regards as its geopolitical “back yard” virtually invites a challenge at some point. True, that is not an immediate problem. The danger of an open breach between Russia and the West has receded, given Russian president Vladimir Putin’s surprisingly accommodationist policies and the creation of the new Russia-NATO council as a sop to Russia. The complete disarray of the Russian military also makes a challenge in the next decade or so highly improbable.

Nevertheless, the long-term danger remains. One cannot assume that Russia will remain militarily weak and politically compliant forever. Yet NATO’s (and America’s) security obligations to the alliance’s new members go on indefinitely. All that would be needed for a major crisis is for one of Putin’s successors to decide that a NATO presence on Russia’s doorstep is intolerable. It ought to be a firm rule of American foreign policy not to extend security commitments that would be disastrous for the United States to honor. In dealing with the “new, improved NATO,” American officials are violating that cardinal rule.

Any Russian challenge in the future would create a horrific dilemma for the United States. Washington would have to renege on treaty obligations to its new allies or risk war with a nuclear-armed great power. The former option would leave American credibility in ruins; the latter option might leave America itself in ruins.

Congress needs to take immediate steps to limit the risks arising from America’s involvement in the new version of NATO. At the very least, Congress should explicitly repudiate attempts to convert the alliance into a force to police the Balkans and other troubled regions. That means passing legislation to terminate the missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. More generally, Congress should pass a joint resolution barring funding for out-of-area NATO missions and affirming that the alliance’s only legitimate mission, as authorized in the North Atlantic Treaty, is to protect the territories of member states. Finally, Congress ought to express clear opposition to any further expansion of the alliance’s membership.

The Need for a Broader Debate

Those measures, however, are only interim, damage-limitation steps. There is an urgent need for Congress to reassess America’s entire commit-

ment to NATO. That debate would end NATO supporters' habit of regarding the preservation of the alliance as a goal in itself. The proper goal is the protection of vital American security interests. NATO (or any other institution) is merely a means to that end and ought to be retained only if the benefits of preservation decisively outweigh the potential costs and risks. It is not at all clear that the "new NATO" passes that test.

A comprehensive congressional debate on NATO's purpose might lead to long-overdue changes in Washington's European policy. For example, a continued U.S. troop presence in Europe is an issue that is separable from U.S. membership in the alliance. When NATO was founded, Washington did not contemplate stationing U.S. forces on the Continent as part of the U.S. commitment. Indeed, the Truman administration assured the Senate that the United States would not provide a troop presence. The administration later sent troops to Europe because of the tense global environment caused by the Korean War, but even then assurances were given that it was merely a temporary step until the West Europeans achieved full recovery from the devastation of World War II.

If a U.S. troop presence was not deemed an indispensable corollary to America's NATO membership in 1949—during one of the most dangerous periods of the Cold War—it should certainly not be viewed as such in the far more benign European security environment of the 21st century. The 108th Congress should finally fulfill President Truman's promise and bring home the troops "temporarily" deployed to Europe in 1951. That step is even more urgent since the September 11, 2001, attacks. The United States does not have the luxury of allowing military personnel to sit uselessly in Western Europe when there is a war to be waged elsewhere against terrorist adversaries.

Such a decision would also signal a willingness to examine the ultimate foreign policy sacred cow: continued U.S. membership in NATO. Despite the concerted efforts of U.S. and European leaders to create a new NATO and make it relevant to the post-Cold War era, the alliance is intrinsically a Cold War relic. It was designed to provide a U.S. security shield for a demoralized, war-ravaged Western Europe facing an aggressively expansionist totalitarian adversary. That situation bears no resemblance to the current security environment. It was one thing to suggest that a weak Western Europe could not defend itself against a military superpower. It is something quite different to argue that a prosperous Western Europe cannot be a strategic counterweight to a Russia shorn of its empire and East European satellite buffer states or deal with the security problems caused by ethnic fanatics in the Balkans.

The U.S.-European Military Gap

Congress ought to view with skepticism the effort of NATO partisans to make the alliance relevant to the war against terrorism. Even though NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (which declares that an attack on one member is an attack on all) in response to the events of September 11, the alliance played no meaningful military role in the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan. The assistance that NATO members have provided to the United States against al-Qaeda has been bilateral and largely nonmilitary. That type of assistance could be provided even if NATO did not exist.

The lack of NATO's military relevance to the war against terrorism is not surprising. There are many reasons for that lack of relevance, but an especially important one is the growing gap in military capabilities between the forces of the United States and those of other NATO members. That gap first became evident in the 1991 Persian Gulf War when U.S. military leaders discovered that the military units of even major NATO allies such as Britain and France were not all that useful. The gap had grown enormously by the time of the Kosovo war in 1999 when U.S. planes flew the overwhelming majority of combat missions. In the period since that conflict, even NATO secretary general George Robertson and other staunch defenders of the alliance have warned that the gap in capabilities has grown so large that, if it is not reversed, joint operations of U.S. forces and those of other members of NATO will become difficult or even impossible. Since military interoperability has long been one of the chief selling points for retaining NATO, that is no small admission.

The gap is the result of the perennial underinvestment in defense by the European members of the alliance. That underinvestment is made possible because the Europeans know that they can continue to free ride on the U.S. security guarantee through NATO. The result is that the forces of the European members of NATO are not terribly useful for the war against terrorism or any other large-scale, significant military operation. They are adequate for peacekeeping missions in places such as the Balkans, but that is about the extent of their current or prospective capabilities. Only if the United States changes the incentive structure by ending the security subsidy it provides through NATO is the European underinvestment in defense likely to change.

An Alternative to NATO

Congress should consider whether it is time to insist that the Europeans provide for their own defense and take responsibility for maintaining

security and stability in their own region instead of clinging to the American security blanket. At least one institutional mechanism, the European Security and Defense Policy under the auspices of the European Union, has the potential to be a successor to NATO. The nations of the European Union collectively have a greater population than the United States as well as a larger economy. All that has been lacking is the will to build a credible military force and develop a coordinated EU foreign policy. Those steps are more likely to be taken if the United States stops insisting on a NATO-centric policy merely to preserve Washington's dominant position in the transatlantic relationship.

The United States would have the option of establishing a limited security relationship with the EU—as a hedge against developments in Europe that might have a serious effect on important American interests. Under such a system, however, Europeans would finally have primary responsibility for the security of Europe, and America's risk exposure would be appropriately limited.

Suggested Readings

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