Enlargement and its Discontents

By F. Stephen Larrabee

On May 1, 2004, ten countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Cyprus and Malta—officially became members of the European Union (EU). The admission of these countries was widely hailed as an historic achievement that would significantly contribute to enhancing democracy, prosperity, and security in Europe. However, in the last several years, European publics have manifested growing concern regarding further enlargement of the EU. Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in January 2007. However, there is likely to be a long pause before the EU enlarges again.

A slowdown or halt in enlargement could have important strategic consequences for stability on the EU’s southern and eastern periphery. The prospect of EU membership has been the “golden carrot” that has provided the incentive for many aspirants to undertake the far-reaching reforms required for admission into the EU. Without this golden carrot, many aspirants may not be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to implement important structural reforms.

A slowdown or halt in EU enlargement also raises questions about the future of the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In the past, there has been an indirect linkage

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between NATO and EU enlargement. Both processes have been an integral part of the broader process of projecting stability eastward. Will NATO continue to enlarge even if the EU does not? Or will the two enlargement processes begin to increasingly diverge in terms of membership and timetables? What are the strategic implications of such a divergence in the two enlargement processes?

**NATO Enlargement and EU Enlargement: Symbiotic Twins**

From the beginning there has been a close—albeit indirect—linkage between NATO and EU enlargement. While each has its separate requirements and dynamics, there has been a close interaction between the two processes.

NATO enlargement was largely undertaken for political not military reasons—to project stability to the east. Ideally, NATO and EU enlargement should have taken place simultaneously or at least in close tandem. However, proponents of NATO enlargement argued—rightly as history has shown—that EU enlargement was likely to be a long and slow process. NATO therefore could not make its own enlargement dependent on EU enlargement. The West needed to anchor the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in Euro-Atlantic security structures quickly in order to prevent the emergence of a security vacuum and a return to the extremist politics and authoritarianism that characterized the interwar period. Only then would the countries of Central and Eastern Europe feel strong and confident enough to develop stable democratic institutions and restructure their economies along market lines.

At the time, many critics feared that enlarging NATO would weaken the Alliance and isolate Russia. These fears proved to be ill-founded. NATO membership did not lead to new dividing lines or the isolation of Russia. But it did provide a much-needed security framework for the implementation of political and economic reform in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, it increased the pressure on the EU to open its ranks to the countries of Eastern Europe. Once the Central and East European countries had been admitted to NATO, it was harder to keep them out of the EU. Indeed, if NATO had not taken the lead in enlarging when it did, the EU might not have enlarged—or at least not as soon as it did.

In short, while there was no direct linkage between the two enlargement processes, they were indirectly linked. The key question is whether this linkage will continue to exist in the future, as both organizations wrestle with the problem of how to extend stability further eastward.

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Enlargement Blues

On the whole, EU enlargement has been a major success. It has helped to knit the two parts of the continent together economically and politically and contributed to economic growth on the continent. Contrary to popular impressions, it has not been the main cause of unemployment. Most of the jobs that East Europeans do in Western Europe are jobs that West Europeans do not want or refuse to do.

However, since the last round of enlargement popular opposition to further enlargement has grown visibly. This discontent was reflected in particular in the French and Dutch referenda in May-June 2005. In France this discontent was symbolized by the image of the “Polish plumber,” who represented a threat to French jobs posed by a feared influx of cheap labor from Eastern Europe. This growing popular discontent with enlargement has several roots.

First, EU integration—and enlargement in particular—has been an elite-driven process. The broader publics were largely excluded from the debate, and until recently there was little effort to explain the benefits of enlargement to the broader European public. As Pierre Moscovici has noted, “the mechanism of enlargement, never shared with the citizen, was rejected as a machine unleashed outside any democratic control, above the heads of the people of Europe.”

However, the days of “integration by stealth” are over. As Katrinka Barysch has pointed out, in the future, the EU will not be able to introduce significant policy changes, move into new areas, or take in more countries without asking the European publics in a popular vote. This is particularly true for enlargement. As a result of the recent change in the French constitution, any new enlargement after the entry of Bulgaria and Romania on January 1, 2007 will have to be approved in a referendum. Austria has also promised to hold a referendum on Turkish accession. Other EU members may follow suit.

Second, the discontent with enlargement reflects concerns about Europe’s broader economic problems—sluggish economic growth, high unemployment, increasing immigration, and the social and economic impact of an aging population, etc. These problems have led to growing insecurity and fears of marginalization in parts of the European population, especially among blue-collar workers, the
less educated, and the lower middle class. If Europe’s economy were in better shape, popular anxiety about enlargement would be far less and much easier to manage politically.

Unemployment is by far the biggest concern contributing to disenchantment with enlargement. In 2003, 43% of the population in the original 15 members before the 2004 enlargement feared that enlargement would increase unemployment. In 2006, the share rose to 63%. In Germany, the country which received the biggest influx of East European workers before the 2004 enlargement, the share rose from 56% in 2003 to 80% in 2006. Not surprisingly, France and Germany, two of the EU’s members that are the most skeptical about further enlargement, also have two of the highest unemployment rates in the EU.

Third, there is the very real issue of the EU’s “absorption” or “integration capacity.” The EU is operating with institutions that were built for a much smaller, more homogenous organization. They need to be restructured and modernized in order to accommodate a Union that may eventually contain 30-35 members. Widening and deepening were supposed to be parallel processes. But lately widening has begun to run ahead of deepening. Thus the EU needs to “deepen”—i.e., restructure its institutions—before it widens again or else it risks paralysis or possible collapse.

Finally, enlargement raises broader geographic and cultural issues about Europe’s borders and identity. As the EU has begun to face pressures to expand beyond Central and Eastern Europe, the issues related to Europe’s boundaries and identity have begun to take on greater political significance. Where does “Europe” end? What does it mean to be “European”? These issues are reflected most vividly in the debate over Turkey’s application for EU membership. Many Europeans—including leading French politicians such as Valery Giscard d’Estaing and Nicolas Sarkozy—do not believe that Turkey, with its large Muslim population and Islamic political and cultural traditions, is a part of Europe. Similar questions are raised about Ukraine and Georgia, even though they are Christian countries.

All these factors have contributed to growing disenchantment with enlargement. Bulgaria and Romania joined on January 1, 2007. But there is likely to be a long pause before the EU expands again, as the EU increasingly focuses on “deepening” and structural reform.

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4 This social cleavage is particularly evident in France. The economically well-off, the well educated and members of the intellectual professions voted 2 to 1 in favor the EU constitutional treaty whereas those who earned under 1,000 Euros per month, the less educated and the unemployed voted overwhelmingly against it. The majority of younger voters—where the unemployment rate is high—also voted against the treaty. See Moscovici, op. cit. [2], p. 14.
5 Barysch, op. cit. [3], p. 82.
6 Ibid.
EU Enlargement and the New Europe

The last round of EU enlargement has also had an impact on the internal dynamics within the EU. Four consequences in particular deserve mention.

First, the most recent round of enlargement shifted the internal political balance within the EU. The new members from Eastern Europe are pro-American and strong Atlanticists. This has deepened the political cleavages within the EU and strengthened the Atlanticist wing within the Union. At the same time, it has made it harder for countries like France to push the EU in directions inimical to US policy.

Second, the addition of ten new members has made it more difficult for France and Germany to drive the integration process the way they did in the past. Agreement between France and Germany is essential for any new initiative to be implemented, but it is not a sufficient condition. In a union of 25—and possibly as many as 30-35 at some point—France and Germany no longer have the clout to dictate EU policy.

France in particular has found it much harder to achieve its foreign policy objectives. France initially believed that it could forge a European community in its own image—the EU would, in effect, be “France en grand” on a supra-national level. This dream began to fade with each successive enlargement. It finally collapsed with the latest round of enlargement. As a result, many Frenchmen have begun to question whether the EU any longer serves French national interests.7

Third, the enlargement has made it more difficult for the EU to speak with one voice. This was vividly dramatized during the run up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in early 2003 when the East European aspirants openly supported the US invasion while France and Germany opposed the United States, leaving the EU badly split.

In part this split reflected the East European aspirants’ instinctive Atlanticism and pro-Americanism. However, their stance was aimed as much at demonstrating that France and Germany did not speak for Europe—or the EU—as it was at showing support for the United States. The sharp East European response to President Chirac’s undiplomatic rebuke in February 2003 that it would have been better if the East European aspirants had “kept silent” on Iraq made clear that the East European aspirants were not prepared to silently kowtow to their French and German elders like obedient

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7 Discontent with membership in the European Union as increased visibly in the last several years. In 2002, one Frenchman in four considered that France did not benefit from EU membership. In 2005, the figure was one Frenchman in three. See Moscovici, op. cit. [2], p. 16-17.
school children and that they intended to have a voice in the construction of the New Europe. As Polish Foreign Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz tartly reminded Chirac, “in the EU, there are no mommies, no daddies, no kids—it is a family of equals.”

The key question is whether this pro-Americanism and Atlanticism is a permanent structural feature of EU politics or whether it will mutate over time. The latter seems more likely. Over the next decade, the new East European members are likely to undergo a process of gradual “Europeanization” as they are integrated more closely into the EU. More and more of their daily life will be shaped by decisions taken in Brussels rather than Washington. This is likely to lead to a weakening of their current Atlanticism and instinctive pro-Americanism, though both elements will continue to influence their policy to some degree.

Fourth, the admission of Cyprus in the 2004 enlargement accentuated strains in the EU’s relations with Turkey. Greek Cypriot membership imported the Cyprus conflict into the EU’s midst and has made the EU hostage to Greek Cypriot policy. Rather than becoming more flexible since joining the EU, the Greek Cypriots have become more intransigent and have used their veto power to block moves that could contribute to a settlement of the dispute and overcome the island’s partition.

To be sure, Turkey has not always been helpful. Progress on internal reform in Turkey has slowed since the beginning of accession negotiations in October 2005. But Turkey has taken some important steps on Cyprus. Under pressure from Ankara, the Turkish Cypriots voted for the Annan Plan promoting reunification of the island. By contrast, the Greek Cypriots voted against it and have shown little interest in taking steps that would contribute to progress toward resolving the dispute since then.

The Cyprus dispute has also hindered the development of cooperation between the EU and NATO over crisis management. Turkey has used its veto in NATO to prevent cooperation in the hopes of forcing a change on the EU’s position on Cyprus. The result has been that cooperation on crisis management has been blocked precisely at the time when such cooperation has become all the more urgent.

**EU Enlargement and ESDP**

The most recent round of EU enlargement has also had an impact on the EU’s European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). The new EU members from Central and Eastern Europe support ESDP in

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principle. However, as strong Atlanticists, they do not want ESDP to lead to a weakening of NATO or the transatlantic link. They regard the US presence in Europe as indispensable for European security and want the United States to continue to play a significant role in European affairs.

At the same time, however, the new EU members do not want to be forced to choose between the United States and Europe. They want good relations with both. They were unhappy with former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s attempt to divide Europe into “new” and “old” Europe and regarded it as a thinly veiled ploy to force them to choose sides—a position they reject.

They also resent criticism by EU officials of their strong ties to the United States and suggestions that these ties are incompatible with their EU obligations. This is particularly true for Poland, which is regarded by many EU officials as Washington’s “Trojan horse” in Central Europe. Poland’s decision to buy the American-built F-16 rather than the UK-Swedish Gripen or the French-built Mirage particularly angered EU officials, who complained that Poland should have bought from a European manufacturer.9

The new members from Central and Eastern Europe support a stronger security role for the EU internationally. But, as noted, they do not want this role to come at the expense of NATO, which they regard as the primary mechanism for managing transatlantic security relations. Thus on many security issues, they are likely to side with the more Atlanticist members of the EU such as Britain, Portugal, Denmark and the Netherlands and oppose efforts to build ESDP into a rival or counterweight to NATO.

**NATO’S Enlargement Agenda**

While the EU is not likely to enlarge again for some time—perhaps a decade—NATO is likely to open its door to new members again in the near future. At the next NATO summit—tentatively planned for 2008—Albania, Macedonia and Croatia are likely to be invited to join the Alliance. Once they become members of NATO, the EU may feel greater pressure to admit the three as well.

Georgia could also be included in the next round of NATO enlargement. This country was granted Intensified Dialogue status in the fall of 2006 and is likely to be offered Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2007. This could put Tbilisi in a position to receive an

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9 For instance, then President of the European Commission Roman Prodi complained, “It is displeasing that one day after the European integration ceremony Poland signs a mega-contract for the purchase of American fighters... One cannot entrust his purse to Europe and his security to America.” See B. Pasek, “Poland Shrugs off EU Criticism of Landmark Deal to Purchase US-made F-16s,” Associate Press, April 22, 2003.
invitation to join the Alliance at the 2008 summit along with Albania, Macedonia and Croatia.

Georgian membership in the Alliance would not have major military consequences. Georgia is a small country, and its militarily forces are relatively weak. However, admitting Georgia would be an important step politically. It would advance NATO’s footprint unequivocally into the former Soviet space and open the possibility that NATO might enlarge further into the region in the future. Moreover, once NATO had crossed into the former Soviet space, the pressure on the EU to follow suit might increase.

However, Georgian membership in the near future is by no means assured. The biggest obstacle is not Russian opposition but the unsettled disputes over the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even if Georgia continues to modernize its military forces and deepens its economic and political reforms, many NATO members may not be willing to support Georgian membership as long as the territorial disputes over these areas remain unresolved.

Finally, there is the much larger and strategically more important issue of Ukraine’s membership aspirations. Ukraine applied for membership in July 2002 and was granted Intensified Dialogue status in April 2005. In the spring of 2006, US officials, with an eye on President Bush’s legacy, pushed hard for offering Ukraine MAP at the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, with the possibility of a membership invitation in 2008.

However, the collapse of the Orange coalition and the advent to power of an “anticrisis coalition” headed by Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, which includes the Socialist and Communists—both of which oppose Ukraine’s membership in NATO—has cast a cloud over Ukraine’s chances of early membership. The Ukrainian government is deeply divided over the NATO issue. Of the five parties represented in the Rada (parliament) after the March 2006 parliamentary elections, only two—Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc—support NATO membership. However, they do not command sufficient votes in the Rada to obtain parliamentary support for membership. The Communists and Socialists oppose membership, while Yanukovych’s Party of Regions, which has the most seats in the Rada, has strong reservations about it.

Moreover, NATO membership has become tied up with the internal struggle for power over control of foreign policy between President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yanukovych. During his trip to Brussels in September 2006, Yanukovych withdrew Ukraine’s MAP application and called for a pause in Ukraine’s membership quest. In so doing, he not only highlighted his differences with Yushchenko over Ukraine’s policy toward NATO but also challenged Yushchenko’s constitutional role in defining Ukraine’s foreign policy.

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10 The Baltic states were always regarded by Russia as having a special status.
Given the current internal divisions over NATO within the Ukrainian leadership, the issue of Ukrainian membership in NATO is likely to be put on hold for the foreseeable future. Cooperation will continue, but there is not likely to be a strong push for MAP or membership, either from Ukraine or NATO, until there is an internal consensus in Ukraine in favor of membership.

Such a consensus, however, does not exist at the moment. Today only about 17% of the population supports NATO membership. Polls suggest that if a referendum on membership were to be held, more than 50% of the population would vote against NATO membership. Thus the Ukrainian leadership will need to conduct an intensive educational campaign to educate the Ukrainian public about NATO—as was done in Central and Eastern Europe before the first and second rounds of NATO enlargement—if it hopes to eventually join the Alliance.

**Going Global?**

The divergence between the agendas of NATO and the EU may be further complicated by other factors, especially NATO’s increasingly global role. NATO’s old agenda—German unification, partnership with Russia, integration of the Eastern Europe and stabilization of the Balkans—is complete or nearly compete. Europe has become increasingly stable. Today the main threats to Western security interests come from *beyond Europe’s borders*—from terrorism, ethnic conflict, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These threats are *transnational* in nature, and they require a transnational response.

The changed nature of the threats and challenges to Western interests has forced NATO to increasingly conduct operations *outside Europe* and with nations from other regions. Thus NATO has begun to seek militarily capable partners who share NATO’s values and are ready and willing to share risks and burdens.

This shift in focus has led some Europeans to worry that the Alliance’s traditional Euro-Atlantic nature will be diluted. Such worries, however, are exaggerated. NATO is acting more globally because the threats and challenges are increasingly global. This does not mean, however, that NATO intends to become a “global gendarme” or that the Alliance’s traditional Euro-Atlantic focus will be diluted by the addition of new members from outside Europe. NATO is looking for capable partners to help share some of the security risks and burdens. These partners, though, will not be members and will not receive an Article 5 security commitment.

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However, it is not only NATO that is acting more globally; the EU is as well. The EU has been engaged in a number of crises outside Europe in recent years—the Congo, East Timor, and Darfur in East Sudan. Africa in particular has become a major focus of EU attention of late. Indeed, some EU members sometimes act as if Africa is part of the EU's unofficial sphere of influence and resent NATO's effort to get involved in the region.

In other words, the changed nature of the security threats and challenges is forcing both NATO and the EU to act more globally. This does not mean that either organization will enlarge its membership to include non-European countries, but the lines between members and partners could become more blurred in the future, especially in NATO's case.

**Implications for the Future**

In sum, the EU and NATO seem to be on different trajectories and different timetables. The EU faces a period of consolidation. Given the current discontent with enlargement within the Union, and the need for further deepening, the EU is likely to face a long pause before it enlarges again. NATO, on the other hand, is likely to enlarge again fairly soon, first into the Western Balkans and possibly into the post-Soviet space. This has several implications.

First, it means that NATO—and indirectly the United States—will shape the security architecture on Europe's periphery. NATO will set the enlargement agenda. This could influence the EU's enlargement options and timetable.

Second, the further east NATO and the EU expand, the more difficult it is likely to be to maintain the linkage that has existed to date between EU and NATO enlargement. Maintaining this linkage was not a major problem in the past because there was a general consensus in both organizations that the aspirants from Central and Eastern Europe were part of Europe. Today, the question of “European identity” has become more important. Many NATO and EU members question whether Ukraine, Georgia or Turkey are part of Europe, either on geographic, cultural or religious grounds.

Thus in the future the close linkage between the two processes of enlargement that has existed to date may erode. Some aspirants may become members of NATO but not members of the EU—or at least not have a perspective of EU membership for a long time. Moreover, the erosion of the linkage between the two enlargement processes is likely to be accelerated if NATO becomes a more “global” alliance. In such a case, the geographic focus and criteria for membership in each organization may diverge even more starkly than they do today.
Third, if the EU shuts its door to countries beyond those with which it already has commitments—the Western Balkans, Turkey—the EU may need to rethink its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). As Charles Grant has argued, the EU cannot afford to be indifferent to the arc of instability that runs through Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus. Unless the EU takes responsibility for steering this area toward prosperity and good governance, political instability, ethnic conflict, organized crime and illegal immigration are likely to spill over into the EU—and in some cases have already begun to do so.  

While the EU may not be able to offer these countries membership, it could take other steps to strengthen ties to these countries and bring them under the EU umbrella. One possibility would be to offer the best performing countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, partnerships in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Diplomats from these countries could be invited to take part in EU discussions on issues of common interest such as Black Sea security, illegal immigration, counterterrorism, etc. While the partners would not have a vote in EU councils, they could help shape the EU agenda on issues that have direct implications for their security.

Initially, some countries may reject such partnerships because they do not include a promise of membership. But when they realize that membership is not in the cards for the foreseeable future, they may welcome closer ties to the EU. In any event, the EU will be confronted with major challenges of how to continue to extend the benefits of democracy, prosperity and stability while preserving its political coherence and ability to act effectively and expeditiously.

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