

NATO Enlargement and Russia

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Summary

In March 1998, the Senate began consideration of a resolution giving the Senate's advice and consent to protocols to the North Atlantic Treaty admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO. The Senate is expected to resume consideration of the resolution in April 1998. A prominent issue in the Congressional debate has been the impact of enlargement on relations with Russia. In an effort to assuage Russian concerns over enlargement, on May 27, 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, President Clinton and leaders of other NATO countries signed a "Founding Act" on Russia-NATO relations. The accord sets up a Russia-NATO consultative council and reiterates NATO assurances that nuclear weapons and significant numbers of new troops will not be deployed to new NATO member states. Many Members of Congress have expressed support for the Founding Act, but some are concerned that the pact could dilute NATO if it is badly implemented. Others feel that NATO enlargement may push Russia into an irrational confrontation with its neighbors or the West. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Russian Policy toward NATO Enlargement

Since NATO countries began serious consideration of enlargement, Russian political leaders across the political spectrum, from pro-Western democrats to centrists to Communists and extreme nationalists, have been strongly opposed to NATO enlargement. This anti-enlargement consensus permeates all government institutions, from President Yeltsin's staff to the foreign and defense ministries to virtually all factions of the Russian parliament. Only a handful of democrats, such as former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, criticize the anti-NATO enlargement consensus that has developed. Opinion polls have shown that many ordinary Russians oppose NATO enlargement as well, but that the issue pales in significance when compared to the challenges of their own economic situations. According to a April 1997 USIA poll, a substantial majority of Russians express opposition to NATO enlargement, but few of them have really focused on the issue, despite a steady drumbeat of official criticism of enlargement. Of those polled, 69% have heard or read "not very much" or "nothing at all" about NATO. Of the minority who claimed to be fairly well-informed about NATO, 62% expressed opposition to enlargement, 18% supported enlargement and 20% were unsure.

Since 1994, Russia's policy has been to denounce enlargement, warn of its negative impact on Russia's relations with the West, and threaten specified or unspecified countermeasures. Some of these threatened measures included non-ratification of the START II treaty, abrogation of the CFE Treaty, increased defense spending, stationing of tactical nuclear weapons on Russia's borders, targeting new NATO members with strategic nuclear weapons, establishing a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) defense union or at least a Russia-Belarus defense union, and forging alliances with China, India, Iran or other countries. By using these tactics, Russian officials apparently hoped to convince some European NATO countries that enlargement could spark renewed confrontation with Moscow. At the very least, it was hoped that adopting a tough stance would provide Moscow maximum leverage in possible Russia-NATO negotiations on enlargement. It was also hoped that the process of initial NATO enlargement could be made so painful that NATO would not try a second round of it. In the opinion of at least some observers, many of these threats may lack credibility. Some threatened countermeasures could hurt Russia as much if not more than the West (such as abrogation of some arms control treaties). Russia may currently be too weak to carry out such measures as increasing defense spending or forging a CIS defense union. In still other cases, Russia may undertake the "countermeasure" whether or not NATO enlarges (Russia-Belarus integration and the non-ratification of START II, for example).

As enlargement looked increasing inevitable, Russia sought to set conditions for its grudging acquiescence to the move. In March 1996, Russian Foreign Minister Yegeni Primakov asked for legally-binding guarantees that no nuclear weapons, foreign forces, or any NATO military infrastructure would be moved onto the territory of new members. Russia also reportedly sought a commitment that NATO would not conduct a second wave of enlargement, or would at least postpone it for a very long time. In September 1996, Secretary of State Warren Christopher endorsed the concept of an accord to create the foundation for cooperation between an enlarged NATO and Russia. NATO approved the idea in December 1996, and NATO-Russia talks on the proposed document began in January 1997. At the Helsinki summit between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin on March 20-21, 1997, President Yeltsin dropped Russia's demand for a legally binding treaty, settling for a political document signed by the heads of state of the NATO countries and Russia.

The Russia-NATO Founding Act

After several more weeks of negotiations, Russia and NATO reached an agreement on a "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation," which was signed by President Yeltsin, President Clinton and the leaders of other NATO member states on May 27, 1997. The document establishes a "NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council" to "provide a mechanism for consultations, coordination, and to the maximum extent possible, where appropriate, for joint decisions and joint action with respect to security issues of common concern." The document says consultations will not extend to internal matters of either NATO, NATO member States or Russia." It adds that the Founding Act does not "provide NATO or Russia, in any way, with a right of veto over the actions of the other..." The Permanent Joint Council will meet at the level of foreign ministers and defense ministers twice a year and at the level of ambassadors monthly. The Council will be chaired jointly by representatives of Russia,

NATO and a rotating representative of NATO member governments. Council working groups and committees may be set up to deal with specific issues.

The Founding Act outlines many areas for possible NATO-Russia cooperation. These include conflict prevention; peacekeeping operations, Russian participation in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace; exchange of information on strategy, defense policy, military doctrine and military budgets; arms control; nuclear safety; non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; “possible cooperation in Theatre Missile Defense”; air traffic safety; “possible armaments-related cooperation”; defense conversion; civil emergency preparedness and disaster relief; terrorism and drug trafficking, and other areas.

A particularly important section of the Founding Act deals with nuclear weapons and conventional weapons deployments in new NATO member states. The Founding Act says that NATO member states “reiterate that they have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members...and do not foresee any future need to do so.” The document adds that NATO “has no intention, no plan and no reason to establish nuclear weapon storage sites on the territory” of new members or to refurbish old Soviet ones left over from the Warsaw Pact.

On the issue of conventional forces, the Act calls for the adaption of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, including “a significant lowering” of treaty limited equipment levels for all parties to the Treaty. The Act says that CFE adaptation should also “enhance military transparency by extended information exchange and verification...” The Act also says that “NATO reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces. Accordingly it will have to rely on adequate infrastructure commensurate with the above tasks. In this context, reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in defense against a threat of aggression,” peacekeeping missions, or military exercises. Russia pledged to engage in similar restraint in the deployment of its armed forces. The Founding Act does not spell out details of CFE adaptation proposals, which are being discussed at separate talks.

The first meeting of the Permanent Joint Council took place on July 18, 1997. Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and the other NATO foreign ministers participated in the first ministerial-level meeting in New York on September 26, 1997. There have been many subsequent PJC meetings at various levels. Among the many issues discussed so far have been Russia-NATO cooperation in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Russian participation in the Partnership for Peace program, and the adaption of the CFE and Open Skies treaties.

Possible Impact of NATO Enlargement on Russia's Relations with the West

It is uncertain what long-term impact NATO enlargement will have on Russia's relationship with the West. Optimistic Western observers believe that Russia's currently mistrustful view of NATO will gradually change as the habit of cooperation with NATO takes hold, for example in the Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council and in joint

peacekeeping missions. However, few Russian observers have publicly expressed such optimism. Foreign Minister Primakov has spoken of the Founding Act as a way to minimize the damage of NATO enlargement to Russia-NATO relations. NATO enlargement may be viewed by Russian elites as the clearest sign yet that the West is not really interested in an equal partnership with Russia, particularly if Russia's views of its security interests in Europe do not correspond with what the West feels they should be. One area of particular concern may be a possible second wave of NATO enlargement to include the Baltic states, which are eagerly seeking NATO membership. Although the Founding Act confirms both sides' respect for countries' "inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security," President Yeltsin said to members of the Russian parliament on May 19, 1997 that if the Baltic states are admitted to NATO, Russia could revise its policy of cooperation with the alliance.

However, even if Russian elites draw a negative conclusion from enlargement, it may not have the catastrophic effects on Russia's relations with the West often forecast by Russian officials and analysts. To many observers, Yeltsin's top priority is to push economic reforms forward. To do this, Russia will have to continue to rely on international financial institutions, in which the United States and other leading countries play important roles, and, increasingly, on Western direct investment and capital markets. In any case, in its currently weakened state, Russia lacks the resources to start a new Cold War with the West; and it would find very few allies to support a confrontational stand. Nevertheless, growing Russian disillusionment with the West could increase Russia's current tendency to show its independence from the West whenever possible, without risking a fundamental break.

Implementation of the Founding Act may ease Russia-NATO tensions over enlargement in the short term, but differing views over the nature of the new Russia-NATO relationship as outlined in the Founding Act may create problems in the future. In the short term, the Founding Act may be useful to Russian leaders because it gives them political cover for having been unable to stop NATO enlargement. However, to be truly useful from Russia's point of view, the PJC would have to give Russia a de facto power of co-decision with NATO on important European security issues. U.S. and NATO officials have stressed that Russia will have no veto power over NATO decisions. If NATO takes important European security decisions on its own, despite Russian objections at the PJC and elsewhere, Russian leaders could come under fire from domestic opponents for allegedly have been "duped by NATO again." Russia could then lose interest in the Founding Act and the PJC.

The most pessimistic scenario for Russia's response to enlargement would involve the discrediting of reformers and the eventual rise to power of leaders hostile to the West. NATO enlargement would not likely cause such a change in leadership, given the Russian public's relative lack of interest in the issue, but could form part of these leaders' "indictment" against reformers. An anti-reform coalition of Communists, nationalists, disgruntled military and security officers and defense industrialists might see domestic political benefits in trying to isolate Russia, however harmful and unsustainable such a course might be for Russia in the long term. This policy could involve building up Russian military forces to the extent possible and sharply increasing political, economic and even military pressure against the Baltic states, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics.

U.S. Policy

The Clinton Administration hailed the Founding Act as a step toward a Russia-NATO partnership. On July 3, 1997, President Clinton said that the Founding Act “would make it crystal-clear that NATO is no longer an organization designed to contain Russia; NATO is an organization designed to work with all free countries to respect the territorial integrity of its members, to protect the security of its members, and to work with its members and their allies — Russia, soon to be Ukraine, and those in the Partnership for Peace — on common security problems like the problem in Bosnia.” However, other Administration officials have stressed that the Founding Act does not alter NATO’s core mission of collective defense. They say the Founding Act is an attempt by NATO to engage Russia in a cooperative relationship but that NATO is “keeping its power dry” in case of negative developments in Russia. President Clinton has said that the new consultative ties with Russia will give Moscow “a voice, but not a veto” in NATO decisions. Administration officials stress that the Act merely restates current NATO policy on the deployment of foreign forces on the territory of new members, the adaptation of the CFE Treaty to new realities in Europe, and on the non-deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states. They assert that the Founding Act in no way limits the rights and responsibilities of the new member states and that the door to NATO membership remains open for the Baltic states and other countries not invited in this round of enlargement.

Some critics of the Founding Act say that it will weaken NATO. In a June 8, 1997 op-ed article in the Washington Post, Henry Kissinger said he was “gravely concerned” that the Founding Act will dilute NATO into a “U.N.-style system of collective security” by “grafting an elaborate and convoluted machinery for consultations with Russia at every level of the alliance.” Kissinger concedes that the Founding Act gives Russia no formal veto over NATO decisions, since if the Permanent Joint Council is deadlocked on an issue, the North Atlantic Council (NATO’s chief policymaking body), in which Russia does not sit, could still act. However, Kissinger warns that the NAC and the Permanent Joint Council will tend to merge in practice, because countries will hesitate to meet without Russia for fear of damaging ties with Moscow. Kissinger urges the Senate in giving its advice and consent to enlargement to make clear that nothing should detract from the NAC as NATO’s chief policymaking body. He adds that Congress should adopt a joint resolution calling for the countries invited to become new NATO members to be admitted to the Permanent Council while the ratification process is underway.

Some experts have questioned the advisability of NATO enlargement, in part because of its effect on U.S. ties with Russia. In a February 4, 1998 article, former Senators Howard Baker and Sam Nunn, former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Alton Frye said that, while the Founding Act was “useful,” continuing friction between the United States and Russia over enlargement may squander “a critical window of opportunity to gain Russian cooperation in controlling nuclear arsenals and preventing proliferation.” They advocate linking the pace of NATO enlargement to the slower process of European Union (EU) enlargement.

Congressional Concerns

On March 3, 1998, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved by a vote of 16-2 a resolution giving the Senate's advice and consent to the admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO (Treaty Doc. 105-36). The resolution reflects the desire of many Senators to rule out the possibility that the PJC could give Russia a de facto veto over NATO decision-making. It requires the President to certify that the Founding Act and the PJC do not provide Russia a veto over NATO policy, or any role in the North Atlantic Council or NATO decision-making. The President must also certify that the PJC will not be used as a forum to negotiate "NATO's basic strategy, doctrine or readiness" with Russia, nor "as a substitute for formal arms control negotiations" such as the CFE adaptation talks. He must certify that any discussion of NATO doctrine should be for explanatory purposes only, and that the explanation should not be so detailed as to compromise NATO's effectiveness. The President must certify that no issue will be discussed within the PJC before NATO's North Atlantic Council first adopts a common position on the question.

In addition to questions over the PJC, there has been congressional debate over what impact enlargement will have on relations with Russia. In a February 24, 1998 letter to their Senate colleagues, Senators William Roth, Richard Lugar, John McCain, Joseph Biden, Joseph Lieberman, Chuck Hagel, Gordon Smith, Barbara Mikulski and Richard Durbin said that enlargement will not threaten democracy in Russia, but will bolster it by denying "nationalists and imperialist forces within Russia the legitimacy needed to thrive." The Senators said that enlargement will not isolate Russia because NATO is making efforts, including through the Founding Act and peacekeeping cooperation in Bosnia, to establish an "enduring partnership" with Moscow. Finally, countering the argument that Russia will be less cooperative on arms control issues because of enlargement, the Senators said that Russian foot-dragging on arms control started long before enlargement, and is largely a product of internal Russian politics, not of enlargement.

Senator Wellstone, who voted against the resolution, said that he is "very worried" that enlargement could cause a "redivision of Europe." He said that it could cause "a poisoning of relations with Russia and ultranationalists coming into power." Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has said he will offer a floor amendment to the resolution barring the admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO until these countries are first admitted to the EU. Senator Moynihan has said that he is very concerned about the impact of enlargement on Russia. Senator John Warner has said he will offer a floor amendment to delay a possible second round of enlargement for three years after the current round is approved. In a February 28 statement on the Senate floor, Senator Warner expressed concerns that the U.S.-Russia relationship may be deteriorating at a time when cooperation between the two countries on nuclear non-proliferation is a key U.S. interest. During floor debate on the enlargement resolution on March 18, he added that enlargement may create an "iron ring" of countries facing Russia.