

The Relevancy of NATO Membership in Russia's Near Abroad

by

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THE RELEVANCY OF NATO MEMBERSHIP IN RUSSIA'S NEAR ABROAD

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Since the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, many nations in Russia's Near Abroad have expended time and effort to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In recent years the integration of Western European economies with that of Russia, especially in terms of energy dependence, places the West in a position of weakness in the face of a newly resurgent Russia, whose leadership faces a variety of internal challenges of their own. The Russo-Georgian War of 2008, along with comments recently made in several Western European capitals, calls into question the resolution of traditional NATO members to honor their treaty obligations to nations of the Near Abroad in the event of Russian aggression, as well as the value of the effort expended to obtain NATO membership by these countries.

THE RELEVANCY OF NATO MEMBERSHIP IN RUSSIA'S NEAR-ABROAD

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, many experts believed that a post-Soviet Russia would look more like its Western European neighbors once democracy took hold, as if 74 years of Communist rule were a bad dream that would disappear upon awakening. Unfortunately, Moscow has failed to move into the 21st Century as a nation based on the rule of law and democratic institutions. Instead, the West now confronts a Russia that acts like one of the great powers of the 19th Century, when such countries bullied lesser ones for their own gain. As Ivan Krastev, Chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria, noted, "Vladimir Putin's Russia is driven in part by the perceived failure of post-national politics after the Soviet collapse. Europe sees the answer to its problems in transcending the nation-state and power. For Russians, the solution is in restoring them."¹

Despite an attempted "reset" in relations by the Obama administration, relations between the countries continue to be plagued with various issues, not the least of which is perceived Western interference in the "Near Abroad," those countries which border Russia or have emerged from the former Soviet Union and have traditionally been viewed by Moscow as a natural part of its sphere of influence. On November 17, 2011, General Nikolai Makarov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, warned against NATO's eastward expansion as a key threat to Russia's security and said that the risks of Russia being drawn into local conflicts have increased greatly. He added that "under certain circumstances local and regional conflicts may develop into full-scale war involving nuclear weapons"² —possibly a warning to the West following recent revelations that the Bush White House debated bombing Russian columns

during the Russo-Georgian War,³ which only serve to reinforce the Russian perception of a West willing to consider military force to keep a resurgent Moscow in its place. This pronouncement is only the latest in a series of aggressive statements from a resurgent Moscow stretching back to 2001, and should serve notice to the West, especially the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), that a time may come in the not so distant future when NATO may be forced to make the difficult decision to defend its members in the Near Abroad.⁴ This problem will only be compounded if plans proceed to expand membership to more countries that Russia believes belong within its own sphere of influence, such as Ukraine or Georgia, or if the United States continues to give conflicting signals through written policy and actual actions regarding the aims or commitment of its policy to the region.

Background

Imperial Russia absorbed many regions with distinctive cultures before the formation of the Soviet Union. From its original territory stretching in the northwest corner of the Eurasian plain, the kingdom that would become Russia was repeatedly attacked by steppe nomads, culminating in its subjugation by the Mongols in the thirteenth century.⁵ Russia threw off Mongol rule after a two hundred year occupation and expanded to include the areas of what are now Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. Spreading eastward into the vast steppes of Eurasia, by the late 19th century Russia had absorbed the last independent khanates and lands of Central Asia,⁶ creating the basic outlines of the country that entered the First World War—a war that ended in revolution and defeat with the collapse of the nation in 1917. The Soviet Union took control of many countries along its periphery following the devastation of World War Two and the destruction of Nazi Germany in 1945. Some it absorbed outright (the

Baltic States in 1940), while others came into its hegemony under the guise of the Warsaw Pact. These areas provided Russia with strategic depth, allowing it to combat any invader on foreign territory in the event of a future war. This strategy would eliminate the repeat of the trauma inflicted on Russia by Napoleon in 1812, to a lesser extent by the Central Powers during the Great War, or more significantly, the Axis powers during World War II, which still looms large in the minds of the Russian citizenry and leadership.

With the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, areas that had been under Russian control for decades--if not hundreds of years--suddenly found themselves independent states. While Russia attempted to retain some sort of control over its former possessions with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which replaced the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, many of these nations have actively turned west towards the orbit of the United States and Europe and away from their former Russian masters. These former Soviet republics are sometimes referred to as its "Near Abroad."⁷ This area typically includes the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (all three members of NATO); Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia.⁸ The loss of this ring of client states raised concerns in Russia at a time when the country was weak and frustrated over its fall from superpower status. It was especially troublesome when talk began of their membership in NATO or similar Western-oriented security organizations such as the Partnership for Peace, which could bring military forces not allied with Moscow to Russia's borders. Paranoia and distrust about Western intentions in its Near Abroad permeate the government and public's thinking. The Russian media has reported that

“One way or another Russia, the entire former USSR, remains encircled by a dense ring of military and intelligence-gathering installations belonging to the North Atlantic alliance.”⁹ At the 2009 EU-Russia summit, President Dmitri Medvedev commented that the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative, which was formed to deepen ties with six countries in the Near Abroad in the wake of the Russo-Georgian War, was directed against Russia, while U.S. officials described it as a way to extend democracy, stability, and security to the post-Soviet region.¹⁰ Russia has raised strong objections to NATO membership for countries in its Near Abroad in the past and continues to do so today. It is especially concerned about the building of NATO facilities in some of these countries, such as the Baltic States. In 2010 Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in regards to NATO’s expansion:

In reality, everything is very simple—as in day to day life. They said one thing to us, but did something absolutely different. They duped us in the full sense of the word. While troops were being pulled out of Eastern Europe, the NATO Secretary General told us that the USSR should in any event rest assured that NATO would not expand beyond the existing borders. Well, where is all that? I actually asked them this. They have no answer. They cheated us in the most primitive way.¹¹

As can be seen in this quote from one of the most powerful men in Russia (if not the most powerful man), NATO’s eastward expansion is presented as a threat to Russia’s well-being, a betrayal of trust, and an exploitation of Russia’s weakness during its transition from Communism to democracy. While many in the West see the immediate post-Soviet period under Boris Yeltsin as a time of democratic reform and an accompanying openness, many Russians see this as a time of chaos, weak foreign policy, and economic decline during which their former enemies took advantage of them.¹² This hostility to Moscow was confirmed in Russian eyes by the West’s policies toward NATO’s eastward expansion; recognition of Kosovo’s declaration of

independence; missile defense development which is considered directed towards Moscow's strategic missile arsenal and the basing of infrastructure for it in former countries of the Warsaw pact and the Near Abroad; and the West's pro-Georgia position during the Russo-Georgian War.

The Obama administration pledged to reset United States policy toward Russia in 2008, but relations between the two countries continue to be strained. Some progress has been made with the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the right of the U.S./NATO to transit materiel to Afghanistan through Russian territory, and work towards resolving the Iranian nuclear issue.¹³ But Russia has increasingly retreated from democracy and bullied its neighbors through economic and political means.¹⁴ Membership in NATO for the Near Abroad countries is complicated by several factors, including Russian leverage over the EU and, by extension, NATO; its willingness to use military force, the usurpation of the democratic process, and the worsening domestic situation in Russia.

Leverage over The West. The Russia of 2011 is not the Russia of the former Soviet Union. Ties between Russia and Western Europe have expanded dramatically since the end of the Cold War, giving Moscow formerly undreamed of economic power over its previous enemies. Imports and exports between the two make up a substantial portion of many Western countries' totals,¹⁵ while Russia works to increase its economic ties with China as an alternate outlet in the event of a loss of markets with the West.

Russia is well placed to supply an energy-hungry world. It has the second largest coal reserves in the world, and is not only the largest exporter of natural gas in

the world; it is the dominant natural gas supplier to Europe as well as a major source its of oil.¹⁶ Some countries are entirely or largely dependent upon Russian energy supplies, particularly countries in the Near Abroad. As such, Russia has some ability to dictate natural gas prices, as well as control over the availability of this critical resource. This preeminence of energy resources is not lost on the Russian leadership. In 2003 the chief executive of UES, Russia's electric power company, argued that Russia should dominate neighboring countries through "economic occupation" by purchasing foreign debts and acquiring strategic economic assets in these countries.¹⁷ Since laying out this plan, UES has purchased power companies in eight countries in the Near Abroad. Russia cut off the gas supply to Ukraine in 2006 and again in 2008, cut off Moldova in January 2006, and threatened to cut off supplies to Belarus and Georgia during late 2006.¹⁸ Russian firms have also attempted to buy energy infrastructure in western European countries with some success, and flatly rejected EU demands to open up Russian pipelines to western investment and to provide stronger protections for foreign investment in Russia's energy sector.

Moscow has also attempted to coordinate export policy with other natural gas-producing countries such as Algeria, evoking the specter of a cartel, or "gas OPEC."¹⁹ While currently not making much progress in its development, such an association would give Russia even more economic leverage over Western Europe. Russia also hinted that the bulk of its energy exports could be provided to Asia or even the United States instead of Europe in the future, once new pipelines to Asia are completed and new liquefied natural gas facilities are built. These actions have not been lost on European governments, and could very well affect NATO's response to Russian

aggression against countries in its Near Abroad when they know Moscow is willing to use energy as an instrument of economic warfare, especially if such actions are timed to coincide with increased Western energy demands, such as during a harsh winter.

The 2008 economic crisis caused Europe to lose influence in the Near Abroad, a tendency that has been reinforced by the current difficulties with the Euro and the question of sovereign debts. Russia, on the other hand, presents the image of having a more dynamic economy, even if its own economic difficulties will soon come into play as well, making it seem more dynamic and powerful than the members of NATO.²⁰ Remittances from their nationals employed in Russia make up a large share of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many of the nations of the Near Abroad.²¹ This silent “export” to these countries also gives Moscow leverage over these countries if it threatens to stop immigration or deport their nationals in retaliation for a perceived slight or failure to toe the party line.

Russia’s economic dominance over Europe poses problems in granting new NATO memberships to the nations of the Near Abroad, as well as raising questions as to the willingness to defend current recent members. Public opposition to EU enlargement and NATO expansion²² leaves these countries in limbo. Current members such as the Baltic States would do well to understand that although the alliance is essentially a defensive one as outlined in Article V, the article stipulates that “member nations will take such actions they deem necessary to restore and maintain the integrity of the North Atlantic area.” With the specter of crippling economic or energy sanctions looming over them, traditional NATO members might deem it in their best interests to not intervene on the side of Near Abroad members in the event of Russian aggression,

leaving it up to the U.S. to come to their aid as outlined in the National Security Strategy.²³ While relations have been tense with the European Union in the recent past, Moscow has focused its efforts on building bilateral ties with countries within the EU in an attempt to exploit the un-unified structure of the West to its own advantage,²⁴ pursuing bilateral agreements with individual European nations in an attempt to splinter any unity in policy that could be directed against Russia by overarching organizations such as the EU or NATO.

Willingness to Use Force. The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 highlighted the extent Russia is willing to go to when exerting influence over its Near Abroad. Georgia, a country on the road to NATO membership, was a willing supporter of the mission in Afghanistan, supplying troops trained to NATO standards for use in the stabilization of that country.²⁵ The war with Russia that followed various provocative acts²⁶ was swift and decisive, and all the more embarrassing for the lack of tangible NATO or U.S. support to Georgia,²⁷ a country that was supposedly on the road to joining NATO and had supported the alliance with troops in Afghanistan. Like the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the U.S. and NATO proved unwilling to risk a military confrontation with Russia over a peripheral country.

Since the end of the Russo-Georgian War, initial talk of suspending negotiations on a new EU-Russia Agreement to replace the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) over Russia's aggression dissipated, and Brussels is again seeking ways to develop a comprehensive framework for its relations with Moscow.²⁸ Even previously highly supportive states like Poland are less eager to risk their economic ties with Russia, as demonstrated by an EU official who said, "There is no dilemma when it

comes to choosing between Russia and Georgia.”²⁹ Moscow continues to be highly sensitive to Georgian military ties to the U.S. and NATO, with the foreign ministry criticizing a U.S. warship visit in June 2011 as meddling in its “backyard”, “in contravention of the current nature of Russian-American relations” and a threat to regional security designed to encourage Georgia’s goal of regaining its lost territory.³⁰

Another form of aggression used by Russia against its Near Abroad is the alleged cyber attacks on Estonia following that country’s plans to move a Russian World War II monument and Soviet war graves.³¹ While not proven to have been launched by the government of Russia, similar attacks were directed against Georgia during the lead up to Russia’s attack there. In the case of the attacks on Estonia, a member of NATO since 2004, Article V could not be invoked since there was no clear perpetrator of the attack and there existed ambiguity in the charter as to whether a “virtual” attack was covered by the treaty.³² These incidents raise the possibility of cyberwarfare being waged by Moscow against countries in its Near Abroad in the future. Such tactics, be they actual physical attacks or cyber-attacks, are in opposition to the United States’ policy of support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbors, and may trigger calls from NATO members for U.S. aid in responding to such an attack.

Usurpation of the Democratic Process. Russia also actively attempts to exert influence in its Near Abroad through the use of ethnic Russians living in the various countries, a legacy of massive emigration to some of these countries during the Soviet era. Western-leaning Latvia narrowly avoided having an openly pro-Russian party as part of its Coalition government following elections in October 2011. The “Harmony Party” is an example of the influence that Moscow has through ethnic Russians in the

Near Abroad, who can vote as a monolithic block during elections, and typically follow the Russian party line on issues regarding their country of residence.³³ In many countries Russia encourages both ethnic Russians as well as Russified peoples (the Russian-speaking population in the former Soviet Republics) to join political parties with a pro-Russian bent in order to build a political front that is amicable to Russian policies. These parties are supported through diplomatic efforts, media support, and advice.³⁴ Such actions to exploit the democratic process run counter to the U.S.'s policy of promoting democracy and human rights abroad.

Worsening Situation in Russia. Despite the wealth that has flowed into the country with the export of its natural resources to the West, Russia has a variety of internal problems. The country faces a demographic crisis, with a negative growth rate and poor health indicators such as life expectancy and increasing disease rates due to an underfunded health care system. The economy is vulnerable to fluctuations in the price of oil and gas, and the country's dilapidated infrastructure, to include aged pipelines, limited highway network, and substandard airports hinders growth in this sector. Its government is riddled with corruption, and there is a growing government control of the most influential outlets of the free press, which tends to blunt criticism of the Russian government.

According to General Makarov in February 2010, the attempted professionalization and reform of the Armed Forces through a volunteer military has foundered, and the armed forces' deficiencies in training, command and control, equipment, and doctrine were revealed during the Russo-Georgian War.³⁵ Ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus have also led to terrorist bombings in major Russian

cities.³⁶ These myriad issues may create two futures for Russia. In the first, Moscow attempts to distract its populace from these internal issues with adventures abroad, which can be used to reassure its people that their country's prestige is still intact. Another scenario might be one in which Russia's worsening situation spreads instability through the region, including health hazards, criminality, arms, or fugitive fissile material. This would work to destabilize not only the Near Abroad, but also key U.S. allies. In this case the West should work to deter this possibility by a variety of means, to include strong regional ties with surrounding countries. Is NATO expansion or membership the answer to providing this regional stability?

NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed in 1949 in response to what the West perceived as increasingly aggressive moves by its former ally, the USSR, including the absorption of territories occupied during the end of World War II and the detonation of an atomic bomb in August, 1949. The essential mission of the Alliance has been collective defense. Embodied in Article V of the Washington Treaty, an attack on one member is to be considered an attack on all.³⁷ Originally consisting of the U.S., Britain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal,³⁸ NATO eventually grew during the Cold War to encompass 16 countries arrayed against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, poised to do battle across the northern German plains and the North Atlantic.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall crumbled and the Cold War ended. Suddenly, the reason for NATO's existence, collective defense against the Soviet Union, had disappeared. With no clear opponent, the need for such a treaty was repeatedly questioned, with some suggesting that NATO was an anachronism of the Cold War.³⁹

Having won the war, many NATO nations cut back on defense spending, instead concentrating on the “soft” power that the peace dividend allowed them to project in the form of geo-economics.⁴⁰ The powerful pull of the Western economies allowed those countries formerly under Soviet domination to move into a Western orbit and away from a prostrate Russia struggling to manage the transition from a Communist-run state-directed economy to a free market democracy.

One way for these former communist countries in the Near Abroad to orient themselves westward was to join NATO, membership in which brought the nuclear shield and political safeguard of the United States from their former masters in Moscow. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, NATO took in essentially all of Central and Southeastern Europe, as well as the Baltic States—12 countries in all—and some of its 28 members now border Russia.⁴¹ But what have these new entrants brought to the alliance? Many of the new members are small countries with small, antiquated militaries whose addition to NATO does not add to the Alliance’s capacity in any strategic sense. Some argue that extending membership plays a role in stabilizing their areas,⁴² but this may be counterproductive if it increases the chance of friction between NATO and a resurgent Russia goaded into action by such expansion. Indeed, the present day context of NATO enlargement is different from the one that existed at the time of the previous rounds of NATO expansion, when Russia was weak, dispirited, and had little leverage over the countries that joined.

Countries in the Near Abroad, such as the Baltic States who have joined NATO, and those desiring to join the alliance, such as Georgia, sometimes find that the support and training for their militaries is often tailored to NATO’s out-of-area missions, such as

the one in Afghanistan. In Georgia, for example, U.S. training focused on tactical counterinsurgency and stability operations, rather than territorial defense.⁴³ Such training left the Georgian woefully unprepared for the conventional attack by Russian forces during the Russo-Georgian War. These new NATO members do not want to be in the position described by the 19th Century British historian and poet Hilaire Belloc, who wrote of the Zulu Wars, “(the British) have got the Maxim guns and they (the Zulus) have not.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, NATO assistance, training, and equipping should be directed toward national defense as a whole, rather than training auxiliaries for NATO’s legions.

The U.S. and Russia have differing goals in regards to NATO and the Near Abroad. The United States, for example, wants independent, autonomous, democratic (or working towards democracy) states open to unimpeded economic trade, according to the National Security Strategy. Russian leaders want dominant influence in the post-Soviet space. The United States wants a strong NATO free to welcome into its membership any state with the will to join and that meets its criteria, while Russia does not want a NATO expanding into the Near Abroad. These conflicting issues and how they will shape the spread of NATO to Russia’s Near Abroad, as well as Russian-U.S. relations, must be considered in light of the U.S. National Security Strategy’s stated goals of preventing the emergence of conflict, pursuing comprehensive engagements, and renewing American leadership,⁴⁵ as well as the administration’s desire for a reset of U.S.-Russian relations.

The National Security Strategy also states that the United States endeavors “to build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests. The United States has an interest in a strong, peaceful, and prosperous

Russia that respects international norms.”⁴⁶ The strategy calls for bilateral cooperation with Russia (termed one of the 21st century centers of influence in the world) but at the same time stresses that the United States “will support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbors.”⁴⁷ Speaking of Russia’s goals in regards to the Near Abroad, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said “What is driving Russia is a desire to exorcise past humiliation and dominate its Near Abroad.”⁴⁸ This would seem to have been borne out when Vladimir Putin, on October 3, 2011, proposed the formation of a “Eurasian Union” that would give Moscow not only economic and financial domination over these states but also allow it to oversee the evolution of its neighbors in its Near Abroad.⁴⁹ How the U.S. pursues the issue of NATO membership for this region has far-reaching implications for America both domestically and internationally.

NATO’S Relevance

During the Cold War, with the clear and present threat that the Warsaw Pact posed toward Western Europe, most NATO countries willingly shouldered their defense burden. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, almost all of the European members of NATO began to reduce their defense budgets and to defy NATO spending targets of two percent of GDP, even as their economies experienced a sustained economic boom and NATO began to advocate the expansion of its defense umbrella to more countries.⁵⁰ Now, 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, only the U.S., Britain, France, Greece, and Albania meet the target goal of defense spending of two percent of their GDP, while 23 NATO members fail to meet this goal.⁵¹

This crucial weakness of the alliance is reflected in several arenas. While Afghanistan is touted as one of NATO’s “out-of-area” mission successes, obtaining the troops from NATO members and using them in combat due to national caveats has

been problematic for the United States. In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates complained “I am not satisfied that an alliance, whose members have over two million soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, cannot find the modest additional resources that have been committed to Afghanistan.”⁵² More recently, while every member of NATO voted for the Libyan intervention mission in 2011, less than half participated at all and less than one third took part in the strike mission.⁵³

In his last speech to NATO before his retirement in 2011, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned of NATO becoming a bifurcated entity, split

between members who specialize in ‘soft’ humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the ‘hard’ combat missions. Between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership—be they security guarantees or headquarters billets—but don’t want to share the risks and costs.⁵⁴

Unfortunately for those nations seeking protection against an increasingly aggressive Russia, the specialization of NATO in “soft” missions such as Secretary Gates describes will do little to deter Moscow as it seeks to impose its will on the Near Abroad. This trend and its implications have not been lost on some alliance members. There is a fear that the focus on expeditionary operations has weakened the mutual defense promised under Article V, voiced by many of the nations in the Near Abroad, and fueled by the 2007 Estonian cyber attacks, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and large scale military exercises in western Russia that culminated in a simulated nuclear strike on Warsaw.⁵⁵

Another indicator to Moscow of a lack of NATO’s resolve in dealing with issues in its sphere of influence can be seen in recent statements from the alliance regarding future expansion. At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, NATO announced that it

would not extend Membership Action Plans to Georgia or Ukraine, despite statements by many members that they support eventual membership.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, this decision followed statements by Dmitriy Rogozin, Russia's newly appointed envoy to the Russia-NATO Council, that NATO membership for Georgia would destabilize the Caucasus region and further harm Russia-Georgia relations.⁵⁷ The lack of any U.S., NATO, or Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer missions in Georgia following the Russo-Georgian War⁵⁸ could also be seen as a sign of disinterest in Russian adventurism beyond hollow statements condemning such actions.

As European defense budgets shrink and capabilities are reduced or eliminated, the American public may become more and more reluctant to support its European allies, especially in times of financial and budgetary crises. A 2004 survey showed that 80 percent of the American public felt that the U.S. was contributing too much to the security of other nations.⁵⁹ While all these indicators may not accurately portray the ability or the will of NATO to respond to a resurgent Russia's aggression toward its Near Abroad, taken as a whole they might tempt decision-makers in Moscow to engage in such adventurism in an area traditionally considered within their sphere of influence without fear of serious repercussions. In October 2009 the Russian Federation Council authorized the use of troops abroad to protect its peacekeepers and citizens and prevent piracy.⁶⁰ Such a law may be a veiled threat to its Near Abroad that Moscow is willing to use force in any situations when it deems it necessary around its periphery, especially if it cites a "right to protect" precedent in doing so.

Conclusion

The proposal of the formation of a "Eurasian Union" consisting of several post-Soviet states by Vladimir Putin in October 2011 is only the latest manifestation of

Russian attempts to increase its hold over the Near Abroad.⁶¹ While it is difficult to determine the long term goal of Moscow, the almost certain re-election of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency in March 2012 will most-assuredly mean a more aggressive foreign policy as he attempts to turn his public's attention from the daunting list of internal domestic issues that Russia faces. This mounting pressure on the Near Abroad will make it increasingly likely that NATO will be forced to make difficult decisions regarding both the offer of new alliance memberships for these countries, as well as the lengths to which it will go to honor its Article V obligations in the event of a Russian attack (conventional or cyber) on current members on Moscow's borders. The growing economic and energy dominance that Russia exerts over the countries of Western and Central Europe, as well as the decreasing defense expenditures and capabilities of NATO's European members, will certainly factor into any decisions made to defend small countries peripheral to Europe that only recently threw off the yoke of Russian hegemony.

Europe, and by extension NATO, must come to the realization that Russian policy towards its Near Abroad for the foreseeable future will be one of increasingly aggressive acts aimed at bringing these areas back into Moscow's sphere of influence, whether they are current members of NATO or not. The alliance must therefore decide how it will manage this attitude in an environment where Russia holds economic, energy, and military dominance not only over its weaker neighbors, but increasingly over Western Europe. The choices include freezing current NATO membership at its current roster and risking a confrontation over the Baltic states; supporting membership to any country in the Near Abroad and substantially changing the support that the

alliance gives to these countries while running the risk of further antagonizing Moscow; or withdrawing NATO memberships from the Near Abroad and abandoning these young democracies and proto-democracies to Russian hegemony and with them the U.S.'s policy of support to democracy.

While the United States has more leeway to act against Russia due to its more robust military capacity and less exposure to Moscow in regards to energy dependence, it may find itself doing so without the support of its European allies. Attempts to placate Russia's appetite for interference in its Near Abroad by allowing its entry into the World Trade Organization, NATO, or other attempts to bring it more fully into the Western community of nations, or pandering to its requests for more say in the affairs of its former satellites will likely increase the perception of a weak West able to be cowed by its former Cold War enemy. The U.S. and NATO must develop a policy for Russia's Near Abroad, and ensure that such a policy is unambiguous and robustly supported.)

Endnotes

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