

NATO expansion and the political crisis in Europe

Part one

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The following is the first part of a series of articles.

On April 1 the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) saw the largest intake of members since the formation of the United States-led military alliance in 1949, when seven central and eastern European countries were admitted. The new members, all either former members of the Warsaw Pact or former republics of the Soviet Union, are Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

It is the second time in recent years that NATO has expanded its membership in the Central-Eastern European region. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joined in 1999.

While the accession of these countries to the alliance was greeted with the usual rounds of congratulations, official celebrations and phrases about the expansion of freedom and democracy, it was clear that they were joining a house divided against itself. For all the talk by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer about NATO's expansion bringing about the end of an era of European division, the seven new members have entered the alliance at a point where antagonisms between its principal members have never been greater. The new entrants join NATO not as independent nations joining a military alliance, but as US proxies in a Great Power struggle.

Before the ink was dry on the treaty accepting the intake of new members, the alliance had fallen back into the distinct camps that have emerged over the past decade. In the days following the April 1 accession, French President Jacques Chirac and Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder had separate bilateral talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose administration has repeatedly expressed its disquiet about the eastward expansion of NATO. Alliance members France and Germany have also been wary about the expansion, from which America stands to gain most. All of the seven new members except Slovenia have staunchly pro-US foreign policies.

While publicly the three leaders professed their support for the expansion of NATO, the very fact that Moscow, Berlin and Paris all orientated to each other is indicative of the extent to which the divisions between Washington and these countries, made evident in the run up to the Iraq invasion, remain. This

does not mean that the three powers will be able to formulate any alternative to Washington's agenda. The meeting echoes that held in September 2003 prior to the moving of the United Nations resolution that handed control of Iraq to the US, when the Russian, German and French leaders met to agree to capitulate before Washington's demands.

A divided Eurasia

The expansion of NATO into the former Warsaw Pact region and the former Soviet Union has been a crucial aspect of American imperialist policy following the liquidation of the USSR in 1991. After this date a large portion of the world, previously off limits, was opened up to American and West European imperialism.

With EU-based capital emerging as the major inward investor in the region, the US has exerted its influence primarily by developing its military ties. The military dominance of America in the region is not merely a counterweight to the EU, but a means of securing US corporate interests over the entire Eurasian continent. Using its network of military bases and bilateral agreements, as well as the structures of NATO, the US armed forces can now manoeuvre men and equipment in an almost unbroken corridor that passes through the continent's major centres of oil and gas extraction and transportation from the Baltic coast to the Caspian basin.

American military personnel are to be moved from some of the large US military bases in Germany eastwards to former Warsaw Pact bases in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Moves are also afoot for a possible new US base in Albania. Under the auspices of NATO the US has also placed its forces in important strategic areas, not least in the former Yugoslavia where thousands of American troops remain on duty.

The Russian government has expressed its strong disapproval of the latest NATO expansion, especially into the Baltic States, and fears that NATO will soon expand to admit the Ukraine,

Azerbaijan and Georgia, which have longstanding relations with America and the alliance. The inclusion of the Baltic States into NATO has already caused a deterioration in official relations between them and Russia. In April Latvia expelled a Russian diplomat for allegedly “attempting to find out about NATO military infrastructure.” This was the sixth Russian diplomat to be expelled from the countries, two having been thrown out of Estonia in March and three from Lithuania in February.

While refusing to officially denounce the April expansion, the Putin administration has issued a number of statements indicating that there are growing tensions between Moscow and NATO. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov said that a revision of the country’s defence policy would be necessary as a result of the encroachment of NATO to the borders of Russia. “The alliance is gaining greater ability to control and monitor Russian territory. We cannot turn a blind eye as NATO’s air and military bases get much closer to cities and defence complexes in European Russia,” he stated.

There are particular worries about access to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which is now surrounded by NATO members Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad, once a specially designated military region that was home to tens of thousands of Soviet army and navy personnel, remains the base for Russia’s ageing Baltic Fleet. Russian military and civilian administrations have expressed concern that the expansion has effectively cut off one of the country’s main military facilities, while bringing NATO warplanes within five minutes of St. Petersburg.

An example of the way in which NATO is used to advance US interests in the region can be seen in the new BALTNET common air-defence system for the Baltic States, based in Lithuania. BALTNET has been put in place under the supervision of the American military and US armaments giant Lockheed Martin, but will be supported and given military back-up by NATO as a whole. Since the early 1990s the US has been the leading power in the long-term modernisation of the Baltic states’ military.

The US has covered a significant portion of the costs of meeting NATO requirements in the new NATO countries, especially the Baltic states. As well as BALTNET three other joint Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian military projects have been funded and overseen by the Pentagon: BALTBAT (a common infantry battalion), BALTRON (a common naval squadron) and BALTDEFCOL (the Baltic Defence College).

The Russian and continental European elites fear, with justification, that the expansion of NATO is being carried out at the direct expense of their influence.

The new alliance members are part of the “new Europe” declared by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, countries whose governments have been among the most unwavering supporters of the Bush administration’s supposed “war on terror” and the campaigns

against Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of the new alliance members contributed armed forces units to the invasion or occupation of Iraq. Only Slovenia, which is more closely aligned to the European powers, refused to directly participate. US forces used naval and air bases in Romania and Bulgaria as key staging posts in the war against Iraq.

Neither can any independence be tolerated. Despite their subservience to the “coalition of the willing”, several countries were nevertheless severely rebuked by the Bush administration for repeating the EU demand that the United States submit its armed service members to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC). In an indication of the relationship that exists between the US and the new NATO members, a senior Latvian diplomat told Human Rights Watch in December 2003 that Washington had threatened to withhold \$2.7 million in promised funding to support Latvian troops in Iraq as a result of the Baltic state’s demand that the US respect the authority of the ICC.

For their part, the European powers are just as likely to bully their eastern neighbours. Last year French President Chirac sharply rebuked the Romanian and Bulgarian governments, due to join the EU in 2007, for aligning with America over Iraq, saying that they had missed a “good opportunity to be quiet.”

For France and Germany the inclusion of so many pro-US countries into NATO sees their position within the alliance further weakened. Paris and Berlin are conscious of the fact that the US will utilise its clout with the new members to increase its weight within NATO and stifle any criticism of US foreign policy. American strategists can anticipate that any moves by France and Germany to form a more independent European military force, especially one that might seek to cooperate with Russia, would be met with hostility by Washington’s eastern European pawns.

To be continued



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