NATO AND EASTERN EUROPE:
AN ARGUMENT FOR LIMITED
AND FINITE EXPANSION

The question of East European countries' membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has become entangled with the issue of the European Union's (EU) enlargement, but NATO expansion into the former Soviet "sphere of influence" is geo-strategically and politically much more controversial and problematic. Whereas some see the expansion of the two alliances as inextricably linked and parallel developments, the present analysis specifically separates the two processes by arguing that NATO expansion will be detrimental in the face of existing post-Cold War circumstances. Thus, the argument presented here implicitly refutes the notion that NATO membership is a sine qua non for EU membership, and continues to support the idea (presented elsewhere by this author) that sociopolitical stability and democratization — the alleged underlying aims of NATO expansion — can better be achieved by membership in the EU.

During the Cold War, the membership of the Western military alliance remained restricted to West European countries and Turkey, and the European continent was divided into two implacable foes facing each other across the Iron Curtain. The situation changed radically with the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union itself. Compared to EU enlargement, the expansion of NATO has assumed much greater significance because it may affect not only events in Europe, but US-Russian relations, the future of arms control and disarmament agreements, and even global politics. Specifically, we will argue that the Alliance's expansion will put European security at risk because of a number of interrelated factors: prevailing attitudes on NATO and its enlargement that are reminiscent of the Cold War mentality; the negative effect of the debate on and implementation of NATO's eastward membership move on Russia's

2. See Beat Kernen, "European Integration and Eastern Europe: Yes to the European Union, No to NATO," in Marco Rimanelli, ed., Strategic Challenges to U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War (Tampa, FL: Center on Inter-American & World Studies, Saint Leo College, Dec. 1998).
foreign policy; uncertainty arising out of the organization’s present and future judicial-political characteristics; and the divisive nature of the expansion process within the East European theater.

Thus, the prospect of the expansion of NATO beyond its present borders creates important political, strategic, and international problems both within and without the Alliance that render it an unwise policy move. The argument against NATO enlargement will partially focus on what one expert has called the “Russia factor,” namely how Russia views and may react to NATO expansion in its foreign policy towards other former Soviet republics, East European countries, and other parts of the world. Russia’s view on the issue will be juxtaposed briefly to that of the United States, both from an official and unofficial perspective, with the latter focusing especially on the American foreign policy establishment. This will help to illustrate the “Cold War mentality” that continues to characterize attitudes on both sides, especially with regard to the issue under discussion. Apart from the “Russia factor,” the principal emphasis in the article will be on the notion that NATO expansion will have other ramifications that may be detrimental to the Alliance itself and may negatively affect the East European area and the European continent.

Any critic of NATO expansion must understand, however, that the initial enlargement of the Alliance may be a foregone conclusion. The West and especially the United States have already committed themselves to NATO expansion and the membership of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic has become a reality. In addition, Russia, faced with the West’s and particularly the United States’ determination to expand NATO into Eastern Europe, has accepted the inevitable. Thus, this article presents an attempt to reconcile these political realities with a theoretical analysis of the issue of NATO enlargement and European security. Finally, since we may reasonably expect supporters of continued NATO expansion to push for the inclusion of other East European countries, an argument will be made in favor of two more new members — Slovenia and Slovakia, but against any further enlargement.

Theoretically, the position on which these arguments are based corresponds to a combination of the “institutional web” and “two-community solution” approaches: NATO expansion should terminate with these five countries; other existing organizations, especially the Partnership for Peace (PfP), should be used to intensify ties to other East European countries and former Soviet Republics (including Russia); and we may expect Russia to push for the re-integration of former Soviet republics and align itself with countries that remain outside the NATO framework. Present-day Yugoslavia would clearly fall into the latter category for not only are its short- and even long-