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The NATO summit in Bucharest produced a split decision on expanding the alliance. Opposition from Germany , France and other key long-time members thwarted the Bush administration's goal of offering a Membership Action Plan (the first stage of preparing a country for admission to NATO) to Georgia and Ukraine. Several leading NATO powers realized that adding those countries to the alliance would provoke Russia and further damage the West's already-tense relationship with Moscow.

But membership for two other countries, Croatia and Albania , did get a green light. A third Balkan country, Macedonia , would have received an invitation if it had not been for an unresolved esoteric dispute with Greece about using the name " Macedonia "—which Athens claims belongs exclusively to a region in Greece.

The addition of Croatia and Albania is a textbook example of what has been wrong with Washington 's NATO policy since the end of the cold war. Those two nations will do nothing to augment the vast military power of the United States or enhance the security of the American people. All they will do is create another set of potential headaches for Washington .

NATO was once a serious alliance with a serious purpose. Throughout the cold war, it was the mechanism that prevented the Soviet Union from intimidating or (less likely) attacking democratic Western Europe —a region of considerable strategic and economic importance. True, the United States was always the dominant player in the alliance, but Washington could count on credible secondary military powers, most notably Britain , France , Germany , Italy and Turkey . NATO may not have been the ideal instrument for protecting and promoting U.S. interests, since it did allow the European allies to underinvest in defense and sometimes free-ride on the U.S. defense guarantee, but the alliance at least arguably served America 's security.

But the new members that the alliance has admitted since the end of the cold war are little more than weak client states that expect the United States to defend them. That was largely true even of the first round of expansion that added Poland , the Czech Republic and Hungary . It was more evident in the second round that embraced such military powerhouses as Slovakia , Slovenia , Latvia , Lithuania and Estonia . Such "allies" are security consumers, not security producers. From the standpoint of American interests they are not assets, they are liabilities—and potentially very dangerous liabilities.

Taking on the obligation to defend the Baltic countries was especially unwise, because Washington now poses a direct geopolitical challenge to Russia right on Moscow 's doorstep. Relations between Russia and its small Baltic neighbors are testy, to put it mildly. At the moment, Russia may be too weak to challenge the U.S./NATO security commitment to those countries, but we cannot be certain that will always be true. One only wishes that the European powers who blocked the U.S. drive to add Georgia and Ukraine to NATO had shown the same wisdom and caution when Washington pushed membership for the Baltic states.

The endorsement of NATO membership for Croatia and Albania confirms that the alliance has now entered the realm of farce. The military capabilities of those two countries are minuscule. According to the most recent edition of The Military Balance, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Croatia's military budget is a mere $875 million, and its military force consists of 17,660 active-duty personnel. Albania's budget is $208 million, and its force is 11,020. They will augment Estonia's $356 million and 4,100 troops, Latvia's $471 million and 5,969 troops, Lithuania's $470 million and 13,800 troops, and Slovenia's $750 million and 5,973 troops. By not offering membership to Macedonia, though, NATO will have to do without Skopje 's $161 million and 10,890 troops.

Collectively, such members spend less on their militaries in a year than the United States spends in Iraq in ten days. How adding such military pygmies to NATO is supposed to enhance the security of the United States is truly a mystery.

But these new allies are not merely useless, they are potentially an embarrassment to the alliance, if not a danger. When Vice President Dick Cheney asserted during a visit to the Balkans in 2006 that such members would help "rejuvenate" NATO and rededicate the alliance to the values of freedom and democracy, he showed how out of touch with reality the Bush administration has become.

Croatia is just a few years removed from the fascistic regime of Franjo Tudjman and continues to have frosty relations with neighboring Serbia . Albania is a close ally of the new, predominantly Albanian state of Kosovo, an entity whose independence both Serbia and Russia do not recognize and vehemently oppose. Albania also is notorious for being under the influence of organized crime. Indeed, the Albanian mafia is legendary throughout southeastern Europe, controlling the bulk of gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking.

It is baffling why NATO (and especially the United States as the leader of the alliance) would want to take on such members. That is a policy that verges on masochism.

NATO is fast becoming a parody of itself. It is increasingly a combination political honor society and geopolitical babysitting club. The admission of such trivial military powers as the Baltic republics, Slovakia , Slovenia , Croatia and Albania confirms that the alliance has outlived any usefulness it once had. Someone should take the merciful step and put NATO out of its misery.

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