As envisioned and implemented so far, the enlargement process is long-term and has neither milestones nor deadlines for completion. It is an open process that in principle does not reject beforehand the membership of any European country (as stipulated in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty). Since early 1994, NATO has committed itself to a gradual and transparent process of enlargement, although the meaning of gradual and transparent is subject to interpretation. If we assume a no-surprises evolution, forecasts of enlargement in the 2000–10 decade can range from a slow pace of one to two new members to a stepped-up pace of two to three rounds of enlargement, each involving more than one new member. Either of these paths, as well as any number of in-between options, is plausible. But given the driving forces at play and the process’s evolution so far, the more likely pathways are in the former, slower category.

The primary reason for a likely slower pace is that the urgency leading up to NATO’s enlargement in 1997–99 has dissipated. That initial enlargement was driven by the strong advocacy of the United States and Germany, as well as by a strategic imperative to demonstrate NATO’s continued importance in post–Cold War Europe. The 1997–99 enlargement put to rest any doubts about NATO’s commitment to taking in new members, and NATO’s involvement in peace operations in the Balkans beginning in 1995 demonstrated its continued relevance. Consequently, with the main driving forces no longer so pressing, NATO’s enlargement has ceased to be a major topic in discussions of NATO’s future. Instead, the agenda is now dominated by discussions of measures to improve the compatibility and inter-
The operability of NATO’s armed forces, the implications of long-term NATO involvement in the Balkans, and the extent of potential future NATO involvement in peacemaking. With the first round of enlargement completed and efforts focused on successful integration of the new members, no one questions the genuineness of NATO’s enlargement process.

Nonetheless, NATO remains under pressure to continue its enlargement. Too long of a gap between admissions, especially when countries evidently meet NATO’s pre-conditions and wish to become members, will lead to doubts about NATO’s commitment. Theoretically, such doubts could decrease the strength of the shaping incentives and the behavioral regime that the enlargement process was designed to help bring about in the first place.

The pace of enlargement would change, of course, if the security environment deteriorated rapidly and a military threat arose. Under such circumstances, military, rather than political, imperatives would become the important drivers of the process, possibly leading to quick accession of new members. Absent such a shock, however, the behavioral regime and inducement aspects of enlargement require that the process be slow, deliberate, and transparent.

**TIME FRAME OF DECISIONMAKING**

A review of the pattern of enlargement followed in 1994–99 is instructive in determining what leeway NATO has in keeping credible its commitment to enlarge under conditions of a continuing benign security environment. If the origins of the enlargement process are dated back to the 1989 fall of the communist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary and the 1989–90 NATO decisions to establish cooperative relations with the Warsaw Pact states, then almost 10 years elapsed before Poland, the Czech Republic (the main successor state to Czechoslovakia), and Hungary were admitted to NATO. In comparison, seven years elapsed between the breakdown of authoritarianism in Spain in 1975 and Spain’s acceptance into NATO in 1982.

However, a more appropriate starting point for the actual enlargement process is NATO’s unveiling of the double track of partnership and potential membership to the former foes in January 1994. With
that date as the starting point, five years elapsed before the three new members acceded to NATO in March 1999. This process was punctuated by NATO’s formulation of membership criteria for aspiring members in September 1995, its issuing of invitations to the three countries in July 1997, and its ratification of their accession by all existing NATO members, with a U.S. Senate vote in April 1998.1

NATO has committed itself to a further enlargement decision in 2002.2 Any invitees in 2002 might join in 2004, if the ratification and preparation process takes about a year and a half, as it did in the 1997–99 round of enlargement. What emerges is a five-year time span between accessions. Under the current benign security conditions, this span of time seems necessary to build up NATO consensus for a new member, place the issue on NATO’s agenda, and ratify the new member’s entry. If the same pattern recurs in the future, the third round might start in 2006–07 and lead to accession in 2008–09, and a fourth round might take place in 2012–14. This pattern, if it can be called such, is far from a given, however, and would apply only under no-surprises conditions.

Because the urgency that drove the initial round of enlargement has subsided, future rounds seem more likely to entail single- or double-country rather than multiple-country (three or more) accessions. Furthermore, it is entirely plausible that the 2002 enlargement decision may turn out to be a non-decision in that there may be no consensus or no candidate(s) that clearly meets NATO’s pre-conditions, which means no country will be invited.

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2NATO has committed itself to review the accession process of the MAP countries at the NATO summit that is to be held “no later than 2002” (Washington Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., April 24, 1999, point 7; http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-064e.htm).
Thus, even if the existing security trends continue, the size of enlargement could vary widely. With up to three decisions on enlargement in the next 15 years, NATO could have as many as 22 to 25 members by 2015. Each decision could lead to an invitation to one or more states, though it seems likely that the process will proceed at a slower pace and take in only one or two states per round. Alternatively, and especially if the security environment shows signs of change, several countries might be invited or, conversely, the whole enlargement process might come to a halt. These are all speculations, of course, but they are based on a consideration of the pressures NATO will face to enlarge further, as well as the emerging pattern of the enlargement process.

MECHANICS OF ENLARGEMENT

Because the enlargement process has become regularized, analytically speaking, it can be divided into five distinct stages:

1. Development of military cooperation with the given country under the auspices of Partnership for Peace (PfP).

2. A step-up in PfP cooperation that may include an implicit or explicit formulation of aspiration to membership by the given country and actions within PfP to advance that goal.

3. Consensus-building within NATO regarding the given country’s eligibility for consideration for membership, crowned with NATO’s open recognition of the aspiration.

4. Detailed scrutiny of the pros and cons of the country’s potential accession and discussion of the country’s shortcomings in meeting membership pre-conditions.

5. Intra-alliance bargaining as to when the country will be invited to join.

Each of the members that joined in 1997–99 went through this process, and future members are likely to go through a similar process.

Stage 1 is simply an expression of willingness by a given country to cooperate with NATO. This move, which shows a measure of common views toward security and the country’s perception of NATO as
a useful institution, requires that both NATO and the country’s government decide to engage in cooperation with each other. Joining PfP is not difficult, but it is not automatic. Croatia had expressed a desire to join PfP for years but, because of concerns regarding its government’s democratic credentials and its regional behavior, was not invited until May 2000. In general, however, NATO has been open in terms of the PfP program. Countries in Europe and the Asian parts of the former USSR that have wanted to join PfP have by and large done so without difficulty. PfP allows a measure of familiarization and identification of problems to further military cooperation. For some countries, the process of cooperation with NATO stops at this stage because of either NATO’s or the country’s unwillingness to proceed further.

Stage 2 amounts to a step-up in the given country’s cooperation within PfP so that PfP may serve as a preparatory path toward membership. This move, which indicates the country’s willingness to engage in cooperation and participation in PfP activities that tie it to NATO more intimately, generally entails that the country increase its expenditures on PfP activities and thus requires that its government decide to shift the focus of its activities with NATO. It also means that NATO has made an implicit decision to engage with the given country in a stepped-up fashion. The transition to this stage is not automatic, although in keeping with the intent of PfP, the onus of the decision lies largely with the country. For example, although Switzerland has joined PfP and participated in many PfP activities, its government has not decided to engage in PfP military activities that would indicate Switzerland’s intent to become a NATO member. Should the Swiss decide to step up their level of cooperation, NATO would not be likely to object.

Stage 3 represents a tougher hurdle, as it entails an explicit recognition by NATO that the given country’s aspirations go beyond close military cooperation and entail eventual membership. The onus of this decision rests with NATO. Whereas in stage 2 the country may formally state its desire to join NATO, in stage 3 it is up to NATO to recognize this intention and then work with the country to achieve it. This decision is important because it entails a future (possibly distant) vision of the country’s inclusion in NATO without committing NATO to the country’s near- or even mid-term accession. By not rejecting the country’s aspirations, NATO implicitly agrees that such
aspirations are realistic. MAP, launched in 1999, commits NATO to an extensive program of assistance to translate these aspirations into reality. NATO’s initial recognition of a country’s aspirations for membership may take the form of a specific mention in a NATO communique or declaration.

The process for placing a country in this category is far from automatic. It entails substantial intra-alliance bargaining that includes an implicit assessment of the strategic implications of recognizing a country’s aspirations. Even though a country has engaged in PfP in a substantive fashion, NATO may not recognize it as being considered for membership. This lack of recognition means that NATO sees the country’s aspirations as unrealistic and/or not in accordance with its current view of NATO’s future geographical scope. For example, except in the cases of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, NATO has refused to consider even putting on the agenda the possibility of NATO membership for countries that have emerged from the former USSR. A case in point is Ukraine. Periodically, high officials in Ukraine have floated the idea of eventual Ukrainian membership in NATO, but NATO has refused to consider this idea (and has refused to recognize similar ideas voiced by senior officials in Azerbaijan and Georgia). Since Ukraine theoretically qualifies for NATO membership under Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, NATO’s rationale for refusing stems from the strategic implications such a move would have for NATO’s relations with Russia (which has repeatedly warned against Ukraine joining NATO). NATO’s unwillingness to accept Ukraine’s aspirations effectively leaves Ukraine in stage 2 of the process. Similar strategic considerations led to Finland’s holding off on a membership application after having engaged in a quiet dialogue with NATO about membership.

Once a country’s aspirations for membership are recognized, stage 4, the tough intra-alliance debate on the country’s shortcomings with respect to NATO membership, begins in earnest. The criteria listed in NATO’s 1995 enlargement study serve as a template for the consideration of shortcomings. In bilateral and multilateral meetings with representatives from the aspiring country, officials from NATO or its member countries point out the country’s shortcomings and work out (through MAP) a mutually agreed-on program and schedule for rectifying them. Depending on the scope and breadth of the shortcomings, stage 4 can range in length from a
few years to decades. Moreover, this stage includes much give-and-take, based on the country’s willingness and ability to address identified shortfalls. NATO has documented the aspirations and progress of various countries since the Madrid summit in 1997. For example, Romania and Slovenia have been identified consistently as making progress on the membership track, both in the Madrid (1997) and in the Washington (1999) NATO summit communiques. Stage 4 ends when NATO recognizes that the country meets the minimum pre-conditions for membership. This recognition then serves as a transition to the next stage of the process.

Stage 5, the final step, starts with a consensus recognition among NATO members that the aspiring country has met NATO’s pre-conditions and is minimally prepared to function within NATO. This determination is political, as there is a substantial gray area for such decisionmaking, and assessments stem at least partly from the strategic and national goals of existing members. Widespread agreement within NATO that a country is minimally prepared for membership does not automatically lead to an invitation being issued. But once there is consensus about a country’s preparation, it is politically embarrassing for NATO to turn down an aspirant, because doing so highlights the fact that criteria not mentioned in NATO’s 1995 enlargement study (such as concern about relations with Russia) have come into play. The analytically preferable course of action in such a case is to keep the country in stage 4, requesting further preparation. In addition, the decision to issue an invitation involves complex issues of intra-alliance bargaining, not unlike domestic pork barrel politics. In every stage, but particularly in stages 4 and 5, the aspiring country needs to build political support among NATO’s members so as to win support for its membership. Once NATO issues an invitation, there is yet another lengthy period, one in which the parliaments of the existing members and the new member must ratify the accession and NATO must prepare to integrate the new member. For all practical intents and purposes, the aspiring member tends to be treated as a member during this time. Its representatives are allowed into most committee meetings and are exposed first-hand to the way NATO functions.

As the five stages illustrate, the enlargement process has an implicit but clear structure and, on the surface, matches the lofty goal of openness to all qualified and interested states as befits NATO’s
increasing collective security functions. However, in practice the process gives NATO full freedom to decide whether and when to take in new members and to specify and interpret the conditions for membership as fitting with both NATO’s continuing role as a collective defense organization and its need for cohesion and trust among NATO members.

The elaborate structure that has developed for the enlargement process is mostly unstated and implicit but is increasingly understood by all. These are the “rules of the game,” and after some initial clarifications, all states concerned—including Russia—have understood them. The next chapter identifies where the various aspiring countries stand with respect to NATO membership based on these rules of the game.