Having committed itself to gradual enlargement in 1994, NATO took the important step of admitting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as members in 1999. But even though NATO’s enlargement has received an enormous amount of public attention, NATO’s transformation in the 1990s is probably the more important of the two steps NATO has taken. Created as an organization dedicated to the collective defense of its members, NATO transformed itself in the 1990s, expanding its mission to include conflict prevention and conflict management throughout Europe, including beyond the boundaries of the NATO treaty area. Both of these processes, enlargement and transformation, have been driven primarily by political imperatives—that is, not by a sense of direct threat, but by an environment-shaping agenda of democratization and integration.

NATO’s transformation and its enlargement process have profound military implications for the United States and its allies. This report presents a framework for thinking about the determinants of future enlargement, the specific defense challenges they pose, and the shaping policies that might help to address some of the challenges.

CONTEXT

NATO’s enlargement and transformation are taking place within a benign security environment that has prevailed in Europe since the late 1990s, an environment characterized by the absence (or extremely low incidence) of armed conflict and the lack of near-term potential for a major war. This environment has come about in no small part as a result of NATO’s transformation into an organization
focusing on conflict prevention and conflict management. NATO’s self-designation as an institution for upholding peace and security throughout Europe means that some leaders in the “unintegrated” part of Europe (i.e., essentially the former communist states in Europe) who otherwise might be willing to use force to pursue their goals now have to modify their behavior to take NATO’s potential reaction into account. Conversely, countries in this region that abide by a set of norms meant to advance democratic internal development and cooperative international behavior are offered the possibility of full NATO membership.

Put bluntly, NATO’s current strategy resembles the proverbial carrot and stick. NATO’s enlargement offers membership (the carrot) to encourage peaceful transformation and integration into a larger European security community, and NATO’s transformation (into a conflict prevention and management organization) provides the coercive component (the stick) that can be used to enforce peace and deter aggression in and around Europe.

As part of the enlargement process, NATO has established pre-conditions for consideration of new members, almost all of which involve internal democratic reforms rather than military considerations. In addition, NATO has identified nine countries as being on track to membership through its Membership Action Plan (MAP). Participation in MAP and fulfillment of the pre-accession criteria do not guarantee that a country will become a member, however. As the 1997–99 round of enlargement showed, strategic considerations also play a role in determining which countries are invited to join and when.

One complication that arises from NATO’s transformation and enlargement is that the line dividing its members and non-members has become blurred. Although this blurring is intentional and contributes to the continuation of a benign security environment, it creates difficulties for defense planning. By taking on a responsibility for European security as a whole and identifying specific countries as possible future members, NATO has extended implicit and conditional security guarantees to many non-member states, such as the MAP countries.
FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT NATO’S FUTURE ENLARGEMENT

Although the line between membership in and close association with NATO has been blurred, the differences have not disappeared. Moreover, military planning needs to take into account whether a given state is likely to be a NATO member soon or will continue in its MAP status (with the associated implicit guarantee) for a considerable period of time. This report develops a methodology for military planners to use in discerning the likelihood of NATO membership for specific countries within the next 10 to 15 years. First, the ability of individual countries to meet NATO’s pre-conditions for membership is assessed using military, political, and economic criteria. Then, a series of cost-benefit analyses is performed to assess a vaguer but probably more important element of the process—the strategic rationale for inviting particular countries into NATO. These two analyses produce an overall assessment of a country’s likelihood of accession.

Findings

The methodology’s use leads to the following conclusions regarding the dozen or so countries that could conceivably join NATO in the next 10 to 15 years:

- Of the MAP states, Slovenia is the most qualified and attractive candidate for membership from NATO’s strategic perspective. The costs of Slovene integration will be virtually nil, and the benefits, though small, will be potentially significant in view of NATO’s focus on the Balkans.

- Slovakia is next in line. Its slightly lower overall attractiveness compared with Slovenia is mitigated by its relatively larger and more modern armed forces. Slovakia straddles the northern and southern axis of NATO’s enlargement; the costs of its integration will be low, and the benefits will be modest but visible.

- Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia are mid-term (or longer) candidates. Their advanced stage in meeting NATO’s criteria is offset by the strategic ramifications of their accession.
Bulgaria and Romania follow. Their relative strategic attractiveness is offset by their inability to meet NATO’s criteria.

Macedonia and especially Albania are the least advanced in meeting NATO’s criteria. Their prospects for membership are distinctly long-term, and current activities center on their evolving into real candidates.

Of the EU members currently not in NATO, Austria is in a good position to join if it chooses to do so. To a lesser extent, so is Sweden. Finnish membership, however, would entail some difficulties because of the strategic costs it would impose on NATO.

The positions just described are in no way permanent, since the assessments assume a continuing evolution along the path currently being followed, and an individual country’s course always can change. In particular, projections other than those for the two clear choices of Slovenia and Slovakia are subject to considerable uncertainty. Moreover, were the security environment to unexpectedly shift away from its current trends, the reasoning behind these assessments also might shift. The changed circumstances might mean, for example, that enlargement could proceed at a faster pace and with relaxed accession criteria.

MILITARY FORCES OF POTENTIAL MEMBERS

Given their limited manpower and generally low technological sophistication, training, and readiness levels, the individual MAP states have the potential to make only minor (though not irrelevant) military contributions to NATO in terms of collective defense and power projection over the next 10 to 15 years. For the foreseeable future, ground forces will continue to dominate these states’ militaries, and defense budgets (except for that of Slovenia) will continue to be much smaller than those of current NATO members of similar size.

One of the most significant problems facing the MAP states is modernization of their air forces. Three of the armed forces (those of Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria) have experience with advanced (fourth-generation) combat aircraft and field small numbers of modern aircraft. The six others, however, are in the process of building their air forces and currently possess little equipment of any kind, which means they cannot now ensure their own air sovereignty and
probably will not be able to in the near future and perhaps beyond. All of the MAP states’ air forces face problems of low aircraft serviceability and limited availability of aircrew training. And because of their budgetary problems, even if the MAP states were to obtain NATO-compatible advanced jet aircraft, they most likely could not afford to operate them at levels approaching NATO standards. The MAP states could more meaningfully contribute to NATO air operations through army aviation (e.g., transport and attack helicopters), which would be a natural complement to the MAP states’ focus on ground forces. But probably the greatest contribution they could make is to allow NATO uninhibited access to their airspace and to provide quality infrastructure to support NATO’s missions in and around Europe. Because of their NATO aspirations, the MAP states are likely to be receptive to NATO’s requests for access to their airspace and infrastructure.

**DIRECTIONS FOR SHAPING**

A well thought-out plan of development and a wise investment of funds could allow each MAP state eventually to make a meaningful, if modest, military contribution to NATO. Because of the leverage it has as a result of the incentive structure it established for the MAP states, NATO is uniquely positioned to help ensure that force development in the MAP states proceeds with a large measure of efficiency.

To be appropriate, the shaping strategy used by the United States and its allies needs to incorporate an understanding of the following key issues:

- The extent of the potential strategic exposure and need for NATO reinforcement that accompany hypothetical threats to a MAP state under crisis conditions.
- The time frame for a MAP state likely joining NATO.
- The severity of the problems a MAP state faces with its armed forces (including the difference between “oversized” and “emerging” militaries, which also indicates how applicable the lessons learned from NATO’s integration of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary will be).
• The means available to a MAP state for addressing the problems of its armed forces.

• The likely useful (technologically sophisticated and well-trained) contribution of a MAP state to NATO’s peace operations.

Specific recommendations for the development of their armed forces, particularly air forces, should flow from these distinctions.

As the accession of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary shows, integration of the MAP militaries into NATO will be a long and difficult process. The problems are especially acute in the realm of air forces and air defense. But whatever priorities emerge and whatever their specific order, what is clearly needed is a long-term phased strategy of development and integration for potential members that would serve both to prepare these countries for eventual NATO membership and to enhance near-term deterrence. NATO has the leverage and the means of influence to help coordinate the MAP states’ choices and to assist countries in working toward optimal use of their resources and capabilities.