NATO - The question of fast tracking membership for Eastern European States

Key Terms

Annexation - The, generally condemned and considered as illegal, act of forcibly acquiring territory of another state by a state usually with the support of military occupation

Eastern Bloc - Collection of former soviet Eastern European states

Introduction and historical context

This is an issue that has become especially pertinent as a result of the major conflict between Ukraine and Russia occurring currently and the conflict, more specifically the annexation of Ukrainian regions, resulting in Ukraine's bid to join the NATO alliance. Due to this unprompted conflict, it is important to discuss in the forum of the NATO committee how to address supporting Eastern European states which face the threat of such conflict addressing the risks of offering membership to them could bring to the members of NATO.

In 2014, the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and placed a pro-Russian government in place. This was the culmination of growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia and then followed by advancements by pro-russian separatist forces supported by Russia creating more unrest. After this many different attacks including cyberattacks commenced with tensions still rising till they once again blew up in early 2022.

Main reasons for & benefits

For countries that could be under threat of their security such as the conflict that Ukraine currently faces as a former soviet state and member of the Eastern Bloc, the main benefit that the NATO alliance can provide is collective defence. An example of its effectiveness to deter attacks from countries are the Baltic states formerly part of the Eastern Bloc which strategically joined the NATO alliance making a state like Russia much more reluctant to engage in conflict with them due to the possible retaliation of other NATO states. It would also give NATO a good strategic partner due to position and size since it could help halt further advances by a country like Russia.

Associated risks & current situations

Two major risks for NATO stem from the added responsibility NATO members could have regarding supporting nations in conflict and the reaction or even retaliation of aggressor states in the Eastern Bloc such as Russia with regards to Ukraine if membership is granted threatening the security of the new NATO member states, neighbouring NATO states and the NATO alliance as a whole.

The NATO treaty has two articles, Article 4 and 5, regarding the responsibility of NATO member states to provide support to other member states when their security is threatened and this is declared by the relevant member state under threat. What would follow is intervention as is deemed necessary which is something certain member states may be reluctant to engage in because of the consequence of this; If they have to assist Ukraine due

to their threat from Russia for example, this would be resource intensive and dangerous considering the sentiment the Russian Federation has already provided towards those that militarily oppose them. Member states may prefer not to be implicated with this potential responsibility although the articles don't explicitly state that they have to assist with direct force and simply talk about the states having discussions about means of intervention.

In addition to these reasons, the Russian Federation has openly shown their disapproval of NATO's past eastward expansion and potential future expansion. A recent example of documentation regarding this was a drafted treaty (see important documentation) to the United States of America demanding the halt of eastward expansion of NATO. It also demanded that the expansion did not go to former soviet states.

Major parties involved

NATO member states
- Potentially responsibilities to assist in protection of security of threatened future states
- Increased costs for intervention measures
- Potential global conflict involvement
- All NATO member states have to be in favour of a new member state joining the alliance

Former eastern bloc/soviet member states
- Former soviet and eastern european states are those that solutions to this issue assist with
- Pro-russia former soviet and eastern european states (such as Belarus) may also disapprove of eastward expansion

Ukraine
- Example of former soviet state under threat
- Would benefit from collective security NATO provides
- Has formally shown interest in joining NATO alliance

Russian Federation
- Repeatedly expressed disapproval of eastward expansion
- Large military threat for Eastern European states and possibly NATO if conflict with a member state arises

Important documentation

Article 4 & 5 of NATO treaty - Articles of treaty addressing NATO's response to the threat of security of a NATO member state. Relevant to how NATO member states may be implicated if states with already threatened security joined the alliance.

- **Article 4:** https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49187.htm.
- **Article 5:** https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

December 2021 Treaty by Russia to USA - In December of 2021 the Russian Federation issued a treaty demanding the halting of eastward NATO expansion especially to states which were formerly Soviet states. (see here)

Possible Solutions

As stated previously, a country very relevant to the discussion of this issue and the consideration of possible solutions, Ukraine since 2017 has made it a foreign and security policy objective to gain membership in NATO. This was also supported by support in polling of citizens. Since then the situation has obviously developed making the issue much more complicated for stakeholders. As such, Ukraine's bid has not actually been publicly addressed but explicitly comes with many concerns explained in the risks section. These risks may also affect certain member states disproportionately due to geographical location, foreign relations and ability to aid a state such as Ukraine with threat to security. For this reason solving this issue has to be addressed carefully looking at the benefit the addition of new states could bring strategically but also considering the prospective risks. Ways that risks could be addressed include hosting discussions between the Russian Federation and NATO members in order to elucidate what NATO plans to achieve with this cooperation or not mobilising forces on borders in a threatening way unless they are in response to a justifiable threat.

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