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International Herald Tribune  
Saturday, September 18, 1993

## **Don't Build on a Shaky Foundation**

**By Gunther Hellmann and Reinhard Wolf**

The failed attempt to end the war in former Yugoslavia has given new impetus to the debate on the North Atlantic alliance. It has become obvious that NATO, despite its ongoing reforms, is incapable of "projecting stability into Eastern Europe and Central Asia," as urged by the NATO secretary-general, Manfred Wörner.

Decision-makers and analysts including Mr. Wörner, U.S. Senator Richard Lugar and Defense Minister Volker Rühle of Germany have concluded that the alliance must take far-reaching steps to ensure its future: They propose opening NATO to Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

There is no question that NATO is the most important stabilizing force in Europe. But adding new members now might put its existence at risk, seriously eroding the strategic consensus among current members.

Proponents of expansion say that admittance of the new Central European democracies would stabilize the region and breathe new life into the Western alliance. Economic recovery would accelerate, they contend, and democratic transformation would take hold. Western Europe would no longer have to fear mass migration or other negative spillovers of conflicts to its East.

Proponents of NATO expansion say it is the best way to ensure the alliance's survival in the post-Cold War world. This assumes that NATO will wither away unless it extends its umbrella to states still facing a threat, and that somehow the mere fact of agreeing to new commitments would suffice to extend NATO's security guarantees.

But history is replete with examples of states disregarding their commitments once an ally is attacked. Without political underpinning, formal commitments have no substance. NATO did not reassure West Europeans and deter the Soviets simply

because of its treaty obligations; the credibility of the mutual commitment was based on the members' common interest in containing Soviet power.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, that threat disappeared. As the fierce squabbling over Bosnia policy has revealed, NATO members' security interests have increasingly diverged. To admit new members to the alliance now would place the strategic consensus under ever greater strain. The new democracies face quite different security problems - regional threats, border disputes and ethnic tensions - from those of most current member states.

Faced by a major armed conflict to the east, current NATO members would lack the strategic incentive to support the new members. Instead of bearing the human and financial cost of military assistance, most members, especially those geographically far removed, would be inclined to temporize. Disputes involving the new members might split the alliance.

Such an absence of common resolve - as dithering over Bosnia has shown - would hardly impress potential aggressors, or reassure their likely victims. Alliance prestige would suffer; likely challengers would see it as a paper tiger.

As matters stand now, differences on Eastern Europe can be side-stepped without violating a central norm of the alliance. A lack of consensus does not constitute a paralyzing crisis for the alliance, but rather an expression of NATO's limited role in European security.

Expanding NATO would not steer the alliance into safe waters. It would raise expectations about security assistance that would not be met.

And if commitments are not kept when push comes to shove, the alliance will suffer, perhaps fatally. Rather than overburdening NATO with all of Europe's security troubles, the current members' interests (and European security more broadly) would be better served by keeping expectations at realistic levels.

After an earthquake, the prudent architect does not propose to add a new floor to a shaken house - he secures the building's base. NATO planners ought to keep this in mind.

*Mr. Hellmann and Mr. Wolf teach international relations at, respectively, the Free University of Berlin and Martin Luther University, in Halle-Wittenberg. They contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.*