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NATO'S OPEN DOOR POLICY

Since the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty, seven countries have joined the initial twelve signatories. Greece and Turkey joined the Alliance in 1952, Germany in 1955 and Spain in 1982. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland became members of the Alliance on 12 March 1999.

Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty reflects the openness of the Alliance to new members. Following the end of the Cold War, the process was reaffirmed at the January 1994 Brussels Summit, at which NATO leaders stated that "We expect and would welcome NATO expansion that would reach to democratic states to our East."

The Alliance has worked throughout the 1990s to end the divisions of the Cold War. The invitation to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland demonstrated NATO's willingness to take in new members aspiring to join NATO and to erase old dividing lines on the continent. Their accession reflects the general movement towards greater European integration, alongside the enlargement of the European Union.

In the 50 years of its existence, the Alliance has contributed significantly to the preservation of peace and stability on the territory of its members. The process of enlargement is aimed at extending the zone of security and stability to other European countries.

NATO's opening up to new members does not threaten any country. NATO is deepening its cooperative relations with all countries in Europe whether or not they have expressed interest in membership. The creation of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the enhancement of the Partnership for Peace programme, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the Charter between NATO and Ukraine, are all part of this process.

The door to NATO membership remains open to other European countries which are ready and willing to undertake the commitments and obligations of membership and whose membership contributes to security in the Euro-Atlantic area. At the 1997 Madrid Summit, when the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were invited to begin accession talks, Alliance leaders undertook to review the enlargement process at their next meeting - the Washington Summit.

Since its inception in 1994, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme has had an important role in helping prepare aspiring countries for membership through participation in PfP activities. The PfP programme provided direct assistance to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in their preparations.

In December 1998, NATO Foreign Ministers decided to develop in time for the Washington Summit a comprehensive package of measures to assist aspiring countries in meeting NATO standards.

A “Membership Action Plan” (MAP) will be unveiled in Washington, designed to help aspiring countries prepare for possible future membership. Participation in the Plan will be on the basis of self-selection and self-differentiation.

Aspirant countries will be expected to continue their active participation in EAPC/PfP. The MAP will provide a list of activities from which aspiring countries may select those they consider of most value to help them in their preparations for possible future membership.

The Plan will include the submission by aspirants of individual annual national programmes on their preparations; and mechanisms for feedback and advice on progress made by them in implementing their programmes. It will also include planning targets specifically covering areas most relevant for nations preparing their forces and capabilities for possible future membership; and annual meetings to ensure that the assistance provided by NATO and its member states is as effective as possible.

The Plan will not provide a checklist for aspiring countries to fulfil, nor will participation in the programme prejudice any eventual decision by the Alliance on issuing an invitation to begin accession talks. Such decisions will be made only on a case-by-case basis by all Allies on the basis of consensus.

Each year, NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers will consider progress on activities under the Membership Action Plan.

“The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty. (...)”

Article 10, The North Atlantic Treaty,
Washington DC, 4 April 1949