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Committed to Europe

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The opening months of the Bush administration have demonstrated that, as much as at any other time since World War II, the relationship between the United States and Europe is open to question. America is at odds with its traditional European partners on an array of issues from missile defense to global warming to hormones in meat, and the arguments are so wide and deep that some on both sides wonder whether an unbridgeable gap is opening.

Meanwhile, in the half of the continent freed from Soviet domination a decade ago, a dozen countries are struggling with fundamental issues about the shape of their economic and political systems and about the kind of relationship they should have with the United States, questions that in many nations are inextricably linked.

The common denominator of the uncertainty is this: How strong is the U.S. commitment to Europe? The answer may seem obvious, but it is not. With no Soviet threat, the need for the United States to help defend Western Europe, the original purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is no longer so obvious. Some in Washington question whether there is any U.S. interest in the security of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The appeal of unilateralism is growing to many in the Republican Party, where some seem to oppose almost any treaty or alliance that constrains U.S. action or limits U.S. sovereignty. The manifestations of that sentiment, most recently in the Bush administration's abrupt abandonment of the Kyoto treaty on global warming, are one of the main factors behind the souring of European opinion on the United States.

Yet U.S. engagement with Europe remains critical, both to U.S. interests and to global stability. By strengthening its military ties with Western Europe, the United States has the opportunity to preserve the peace not only in Europe but also in other regions, retaining leadership while spreading the costs, as it has done in the Gulf and the Balkans. And by engaging closely with the states of Central and Eastern Europe, it has the chance to ensure that they evolve into stable democratic countries that are allied to the West, an outcome that, without U.S. leadership, is not at all ensured.

The way for the Bush administration to accomplish both these aims is to make reinforcement and expansion of NATO a high priority during the next two years. NATO has already decided to take up the question of expansion at a summit scheduled for Prague next year, and no fewer than nine nations are hoping for invitations: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on the Baltic coast, Slovakia and Slovenia in Central Europe, and Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia and Albania in the south.

In some ways the debate over expansion should be simplified by NATO's successful integration of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary since 1997. Although all three countries, like their West European neighbors, have been slow to increase defense spending and upgrade their militaries, all three have made valuable contributions to NATO operations in the Balkans. They have become flourishing democracies and have been more supportive of the United States diplomatically than Germany or France. And all three of these former Warsaw Pact countries have retained good relations with Russia despite their NATO membership.

The next group of countries inspires many of the same doubts that were raised about Poland and Hungary in the early 1990s. Some worry that admission of the Baltic states will be too provocative to Russia. Others argue that Romania and Albania have not yet proved to be stable democracies. But such arguments risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. The Baltic states now are relatively free from Russian bullying, but if NATO decides to exclude them for fear of offending Moscow, President Vladimir Putin will surely conclude that he has been granted a license to restore suzerainty. And were Romania

rejected by the West it would be more likely to take the road of its neighbor, Moldova, which has restored the Communist Party to power.

Clearly it would be difficult both politically and militarily for NATO to integrate all nine candidate nations at once. But it could resolve at Prague that all are, in principle, accepted as NATO partners, while setting specific political and military standards that must be met for full integration. These standards should include such democratic tests as freedom of the press, civilian control of the military and respect for minority rights as well as purely military criteria. Nations should win full admittance as soon as they fulfill the standards.

Some would get in almost immediately, while others would require more time. But all would have a powerful incentive to meet Western norms and the security of knowing that their future lay with an alliance of democracies led by the United States. Europe's uncertainty about the future of its relationship with the United States means that NATO expansion will never occur if the initiative is left to Europe. But if President George W. Bush makes NATO expansion a priority, it will surely move to the center of the trans-Atlantic relationship, offering a ready means to revitalize the alliance and ensure that democracy and American leadership define the future of Central and Eastern Europe. Mr. Bush will make his first trip to Europe as president in six weeks' time. NATO expansion should be at the center of his agenda. - THE WASHINGTON POST.



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