

Helsinki Commission

“The Western Balkans and the 2012 NATO Summit”

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January 18, 2012

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you on a subject close to my heart and brain: NATO and the Western Balkans.

**NATO entered the Balkans in 1993**, with the no-fly zone over Bosnia. It was an important moment. Until then, Yugoslavia had been considered outside the NATO area, a concept that lost relevance as the Alliance moved from thinking of itself as a defensive pact against the Soviet Union to an alliance protecting European and American security from risks arising anywhere in the world.

**Two decades later, the Western Balkans are entering NATO.** Slovenia (2004), Croatia (2009) and Albania (2009) have already made the strategic choice of aligning their defense efforts with NATO. They also contribute to Alliance efforts in Afghanistan and Kosovo, taking on burdens at least proportional to their size and economic weight. They enable us to devote American personnel to other priority missions, both NATO and non-NATO.

**Slovenia, Croatia and Albania have also benefited from their efforts** to reform their security services, professionalize and reorganize them to meet NATO standards. These are countries that have made a profound commitment to democratic norms, even if they still sometimes struggle to meet them.

Five more countries of the Western Balkans remain outside NATO. **It is time to open the door and allow two of them to begin to enter: Macedonia and Montenegro.**

**Macedonia has done yeoman’s work completing its membership action plan.** Just ten years ago, ethnic war racked the country. The conflict ended with agreement to reform its state institutions, including the security services. The Macedonians took advantage of the opportunity to professionalize their security forces to meet NATO standards.

I spoke Friday with Brigadier General William Roy, whose Vermont National Guard brigade deployed for six months in 2010 to Afghanistan with Macedonian troops. He reports in an email: “By all accounts they performed their mission to the desired standard. **They were involved in a number of tactical engagements with enemy forces while integrated with my companies. Most impressive has been the development of their NCO Corps; a key to having a well trained and disciplined force.**”

While I might wish Skopje would spend less money on tributes to Alexander the Great, **the only thing keeping Macedonia from NATO membership today is the dispute with Greece** over the country’s name, which prevented it from receiving an invitation at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. Since then, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has found that Greece violated its interim accord with the government in Skopje when it blocked membership at Bucharest.

**May is the time to correct the injustice done at Bucharest. Chicago is the place.** The NATO Summit should issue an invitation for membership to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or to Macedonia by whatever name Skopje and Athens may agree on. **The United States should make it clear to Greece that repeating the mistake of Bucharest is not acceptable, as the ICJ has already said.**

With the door to NATO open at Chicago, I would also urge that **Montenegro be given a clear signal that it, too, will get an invitation once it completes its Membership Action Plan.** We should not close the door to a country that has been willing to join us in Afghanistan and contributes to UN operations in Somalia and Liberia.

Three more Western Balkans countries would still remain outside NATO: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. **None is ready for an invitation.** Bosnia has failed to meet the international community requirement that it resolve defense property issues. It should get that done before Chicago so it can embark on the membership process. Kosovo, which will want to join NATO as quickly as possible, is just beginning to think about the nature and shape of its future security forces. **The United States should help Kosovo establish forces that can meet its legitimate security interests within the NATO context,** enabling the eventual withdrawal of NATO's Kosovo force (KFOR).

Serbia has not indicated it wishes to join NATO, due to popular distaste for an Alliance that bombed the country in 1999 and played a crucial role in removing Kosovo from Milosevic regime oppression. Nevertheless, Serbia has participated in Partnership for Peace and has deployed troops to Afghanistan. **The NATO door should stay open. The choice of joining or not should be Belgrade's.**

**The odds of Serbia joining NATO would be significantly increased if Macedonia and especially Montenegro were to make clear progress toward membership in Chicago.** NATO members would then eventually surround Serbia, making the decision to join geographically and strategically compelling.

With a decision to join NATO, **Belgrade would have to make other difficult decisions: about both Bosnia and Kosovo.** Good neighborly relations are a prerequisite for NATO, as they are for the EU. But EU membership is still far off. Serbia could, if it wanted, join NATO much faster, but **it will need to demonstrate unequivocally respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all its neighbors.**

NATO membership is not a panacea. I do not believe allowing Bosnia early entry, as some advocate, would be wise. But **real progress on membership for Macedonia and Montenegro at Chicago would impart a sense of momentum** to the Western Balkans that is lacking today. With Europe immersed in a financial crisis, only Croatia can hope for EU membership within the next few years. The others will have to wait until Europe has its financial house in order.

Many current members have found NATO provides relief from the historic baggage of past wars, ethnic conflicts and mass atrocities. Joining an alliance to make the world safer for democratic societies is a noble cause. **It is a good idea to extend an invitation to Macedonia at Chicago and make welcoming noises to Montenegro.** The door should remain open for the others to enter when they are ready and willing. **NATO expansion into the Balkans serves U.S. interests not only in that region but wherever NATO or U.S. forces deploy in the future.**