
NATO reaching out to the Black Sea

By Andrei Fedyashin
RIA Novosti - 10/7/2008

On July 9, at NATO's Brussels headquarters, Albania and Croatia signed protocols for NATO membership. Officially, they will become the 27th and 28th members of the alliance at next April's jubilee summit in Strasbourg, France and neighboring Kehl, Germany.

Next year, NATO will be 60 years old, and it will celebrate its jubilee with its sixth expansion. Serbia will be completely surrounded with the registration of the two new members. It is the only Balkan country which has not yet expressed a desire to join the bloc because the Serbians remember only too well the bombings in the 1990s. Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro have already applied for NATO membership, and their entry is just a matter of time.

It is clear that in the not so distant future NATO will spread to the Black Sea's northern shores. The leaders of Ukraine and Georgia have expressed a desire to join the alliance; however, they failed to realize their goals at a recent summit in Bucharest as all parties were concerned about a negative Russian response. Russia is already faced with the prospect of a new U.S. missile defense system in Europe. Too much trouble could cause a hypertensive emergency in Russia's arterial system of energy supplies to Europe, or some other surprise. It is clear that NATO will not display such tact next year. Moscow should prepare its possible responses early.

For the time being, the Russian Foreign Ministry has made some suggestions. It is obvious why NATO, which was set up to protect the borders of its members, started its eastward expansion immediately after the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union's collapse. A buffer between such an unpredictable and huge neighbor made Europe feel more comfortable. Strategic considerations were simple and are not worth rehashing.

But NATO's attempts to justify its expansion to the east and the south-east are becoming increasingly absurd.

Each potential member has to meet certain requirements in order to be accepted. Nobody has cancelled these rules. Croatia seems to be eligible. It was one of the most advanced regions in the former Yugoslavia, and has already tailored its laws, judiciary and army to NATO's demands. Corruption in Croatia is not as rampant as in the neighboring Balkan countries.

Macedonia was one of the three, and also seemed to meet NATO's requirements but Greece blocked its advance to membership. Athens is still indignant that Skopje dares to call itself Macedonia, thereby stealing from Greece the historic name of its province. The Greeks demand that Macedonia change its name at least to Skopje-Macedonia though it's not clear what this will accomplish since "Macedonia" still exists, but Greece must know better.

If NATO really wanted to enhance Balkan stability rather than cut Russia to size in the south, Macedonia should be the first to be granted NATO membership. Macedonia does not conceal that it wants to join NATO in order to calm its own Albanian community, which has been galvanized by the Kosovo syndrome. Ethnic Albanians account for 40% of the population, and they would like to follow Kosovo's example.

But the third candidate, Albania, hardly meets any of NATO's criteria. Transparency International, which compiles a list of the most corrupt countries every year, has placed Albania 105th out of 180 on this year's list. Nobody can explain why and how but Albania succeeds in transforming all its regimes into corrupt dictatorships. Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha and his son Shkelzen were involved in a loud scandal over arms contracts with proxy or fake American companies, which sold huge amounts of weapons left from communist times. Albania is considered the primary supplier of illegal arms to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

Speaking at the ceremony in Brussels, Albanian Foreign Minister Lulzim Basha said that his government will continue the reforms which have opened the door to NATO, and will carry out its new commitments. At the same ceremony, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer congratulated the new members, saying this was a good day for European security - and another step toward increasing the number of the alliance's democratic member-countries. He seems so used to saying the right things that he does not seem to pay attention to what he says.

Meanwhile, our unforgettable Nikita Khrushchev could not be denied a sense of humor, at least in the beginning of his rule. Few remember that at the start of "Khrushchev's thaw", Moscow declared its readiness to join NATO. Back in 1954, the foreign ministers of the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union held a conference on collective security in Europe. The Western partners were so convincing in describing NATO's defensive orientation that right after the meeting Khrushchev instructed the Soviet government to propose the Soviet Union's entry into NATO, and the signing of a collective security treaty, which it did.

This proposal bordered on mockery but it was a match for the U.S. president and the NATO secretary-general's statements about NATO being the embodiment of peace, democracy, and prosperity. Maybe, we should have another go?

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.
