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The U.S. Should Back Montenegro's NATO Membership

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Montenegro, a small but geopolitically important Balkan nation, has made steady progress in its path toward NATO membership since it formally began a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2009. As one of the four official NATO-aspirant countries and currently in the third cycle of the MAP, Montenegro has made and continues to make significant reforms that are essential for NATO membership. The most vital of these reforms concern strengthening the rule of law and building up defense capabilities.

Montenegro would be a welcome addition to the NATO alliance, and its accession to full membership would contribute to continued regional stability. Provided that reforms are successfully completed, Montenegro should be given the full NATO membership it has been promised, and the United States should continue to champion its cause.

NATO Enlargement Remains Important. Since it was formed in 1949, NATO has expanded its membership six times, adding new partner nations that “further the principles” of NATO and “contribute to the security of the North Atlantic.”

NATO’s “open-door policy” is critical to mobilizing Europe and its allies around a collective transatlantic defense. According to Article 10 of the North

Atlantic Treaty, any European state that fulfills the requirements of the treaty and demonstrates the competency to contribute to the alliance’s security is eligible for membership.¹ The U.S. should make sure that the open-door policy is not stifled; Montenegro’s inclusion in the alliance is a significant test of this policy.

In February, Montenegro’s Prime Minister Milo Đukanović stated, “The only way of strengthening the stability of the (Western Balkans) is to pursue the NATO integration path.”² The United States should continue to encourage Montenegro’s reforms and fully support their application to become full NATO members.

Montenegro’s Path to NATO Membership. Montenegro has been a member of the NATO Partnership for Peace since 2006 soon after gaining independence from Serbia earlier that same year. Partnership for Peace is a framework for bilateral cooperation established in 1991 after the breakup of the Soviet Union to promote security partnerships between NATO and non-NATO European nations.

In 1999, NATO instituted Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to “help countries aspiring to NATO membership in their preparations.”³ In 2009, Montenegro began a NATO MAP, having expressed formal interest in joining NATO in 2008.

Montenegro successfully completed the second cycle of its MAP and is currently undertaking a third MAP cycle. This cycle includes 49 goals agreed to in March 2012 to be implemented over the course of two years.

One important issue to consider is Montenegro’s defense spending. Currently, it spends 1.63 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense

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and military-related expenditures. Although this amount is a higher percentage of GDP than that of 20 out of 28 NATO members, it is still below the benchmark of 2 percent of GDP spelled out by NATO.⁴

Montenegro Is Already Contributing to NATO. Despite the small size of Montenegro's military (just over 2,000 total service members in the army, air force, and navy), the nation has already contributed respectably to the NATO alliance. In May 2010, Montenegro joined the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan.

Currently, Montenegro has a small detachment of troops serving in ISAF. Montenegro spends more than 10 percent of its entire defense budget to support its ISAF troop contribution in Afghanistan. In addition, Montenegro is contributing naval officers to anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa and has observers deployed to the United Nations missions in Liberia and Cyprus. These contributions demonstrate a willingness by Montenegro to contribute to global security.

Backing Montenegro Is the Right Thing. Montenegro is making steady progress in its path toward NATO membership. Montenegrin membership in NATO does not bring risk to the security of the alliance. Montenegro already contributes to NATO security operations and has good relations with all of its neighbors—no easy feat for a country located in the Balkans. Keeping the door closed to Montenegro does not benefit Europe's security and it weakens NATO's open-door policy as a tool for reform, modernization, and democratization for potential countries.

Montenegro should continue to implement the conditions and standards of its reform agenda, reinforcing institutions for fighting corruption and organized crime, enhancing the rule of law, and strengthening human rights.

In order to fulfill the goals set out in the third MAP cycle by March 2014, the U.S. should assist Montenegro with its reform process. U.S. support would also help Montenegro strengthen interoperability within the NATO framework and continue to develop operational capacity for NATO missions. On a political level, Montenegro's leadership needs to clarify the benefits of NATO membership to its public.

The U.S. should encourage its NATO allies to include Montenegro as a full member in a timely fashion once the criteria put forth in Montenegro's MAP have been successfully fulfilled.

A Worthy Partner. NATO has been the cornerstone of transatlantic security since 1949. Enlargement of the alliance has greatly contributed to security of the member states and regional stability. The U.S. should work to ensure that NATO's open-door policy remains in force and that qualified nations are allowed a timely accession to the alliance.

Montenegro has already shown itself to be a very helpful partner for NATO's mission in Afghanistan. As Montenegro continues reforms—most importantly, reforms to its military—it should be given full membership in NATO as it has been promised.

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1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "North Atlantic Treaty," April 4, 1949, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-857936BB-66246E10/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm (accessed May 30, 2013).
 2. *DiploNews*, "Montenegro Achieves Progress Towards EU-NATO Membership, Pursues Needed Reforms," February 13, 2013, http://www.diplonews.com/intro/2013/20130213_MontenegroNATOProgress.php (accessed May 30, 2013).
 3. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Membership Action Plan (MAP)," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-00728B06-5B501AFF/natolive/topics_37356.htm (accessed May 30, 2013).
 4. This information is based on official NATO figures from 2011, the most recently publicly available figure by NATO. News release, "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 13, 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_85966.htm (accessed May 30, 2013).