

Expanding NATO: The Case for Slovenia

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Since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization first formally raised the issue of expanding its membership in 1994, most of Central and Eastern Europe's new democracies have lobbied extensively for invitations into Europe's preeminent security alliance. In 1997 at the Madrid Summit, only three states—the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—were offered invitations to join. They became full members in 1999. In 2000, nine states known as the “Vilnius Nine” came together in Vilnius, Lithuania, to promote their joint membership appeal. These states included Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Since that time the momentum for expansion has grown as Croatia has joined in the call for membership in NATO.

Although US President George W. Bush's Administration was quiet on the question of NATO's expansion in its first months in office, upon his first presidential trip to Europe in June 2001, Bush called for NATO's enlargement “from the Baltic to Black Sea.”¹ Such robust appeals for expansion increased after the 11 September 2001 terrorist strikes on the United States.

Among all applicant states, Slovenia has been viewed by both politicians and analysts as the most likely candidate to be invited at NATO's forthcoming summit in Prague in November 2002. On 21 June 2000, US Senator Joe Biden remarked that Slovenia was “eminently qualified for NATO membership” and a “shoo-in in Prague.”² On 31 May 2002, Senator George Voinovich similarly stated, “I do not know of any of the aspirants that are interested in NATO that [is] more qualified than Slovenia.”³ Thomas S. Szayna also argued in a recent study that Slovenia was the best prepared of all applicants for membership.⁴ Such beliefs were echoed at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, in the summer of 2001.⁵

While Slovenia is known to many defense specialists and military experts, most Americans know little about this small European state, which has a land mass similar in size to New Jersey and a population of only two million people. This article attempts to bridge that gap by providing a political and military assessment of Slovenia's potential contributions to the alliance as a formal member-state. Such questions will become increasingly important to the parliaments of the NATO allies, and especially to the US Senate, once the eventual invitees undergo NATO's domestic ratification processes. Excellent research has already been conducted on the applicant states, but no widely available analysis on Slovenia includes the political changes that came with the 9/11 terrorist strikes, or the military adaptations that have continued in this aspiring NATO state in 2001 and 2002.⁶

In this article, the 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement* will be used to assess Slovenia's ability to meet the alliance's political and military goals. These benchmarks for the applicants were refined in 1999 at the Washington Summit, but in no way guarantee an applicant's automatic acceptance into NATO if it meets the ostensible criteria.⁷ These expectations, though, will undoubtedly be used by NATO and its constituents' legislatures to assess which states are ready for membership. This article also includes analysis of Slovenia's cooperation in the war on terrorism, a security challenge for NATO that became increasingly important after 9/11, and likely a crucial political variable to the US Senate in the ratification process. These findings suggest that Slovenia's membership in NATO serves the alliance's interest, especially due to its geographic location and its implemented military reforms. Recent domestic political developments in Slovenia, however, raise some concerns regarding public support for NATO and the alliance's broader mission in European security.

Slovenia voted for its independence from Yugoslavia on 13 December 1990. In a ten-day war that began on 25 June 1991, Slovenia fought and gained that independence from Yugoslavia and its dictator, Slobodan Milosevic. The United States recognized Slovenia as an independent state on 7 April 1992, and Slovenia was seated at the United Nations in May 1992.

Through a vote in its National Assembly, Slovenia formally requested membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace on 30 March 1994, and since that time the country has actively campaigned for an invitation into the alliance.⁸ At the Madrid Summit in 1997, Slovenia and Romania were favored for membership by Canada, Germany, France, and Italy, but the United States was unwilling to expand

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the alliance beyond its three favored candidates. Although Slovenia and Romania lost their battle to gain membership at that time, NATO promised to keep its doors open to all worthy applicants.⁹ At the Washington Summit in 1999, while in the midst of NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo, the allies announced that they would again consider expansion at the Prague Summit in November 2002. With the likelihood of Slovenia's membership in NATO being so high, and given the ensuing questions that will likely come during the domestic ratification processes, it is time to assess Slovenia's potential contributions to the alliance.¹⁰

NATO's Political Expectations

In the 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement*, the alliance established two sets of expectations for applicant states. The first set addressed NATO's "political" goals for potential members. In short, NATO expected that the applicants would be fully-functioning democracies, with civilian control of their military forces. The applicants should have all border disputes resolved, as well as resolutions to any remaining problems regarding minority rights. The applicants, more broadly, must also share the alliance's values, meaning that the applicants must accept the principle of consensus decisionmaking and believe in the alliance's overall strategic objectives.¹¹

Since Slovenia gained its independence from Yugoslavia, its democratic transition has been viewed favorably by independent analysts, nongovernmental organizations, and governments alike.¹² National elections for the presidency (five-year terms) took place in 1992 and 1997, and are on schedule for 2002. Its legislative branch, consisting of two houses, has also undergone peaceful democratic elections. Both houses, the National Assembly (90 seats) and the National Council (40 seats), have multi-party representation. Human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House, have found little to criticize regarding Slovenia's protection of civil and political rights.¹³ The US State Department's *2001 Annual Report on Human Rights* provides generally positive views of Slovenia's transition to and practice of democracy, including its treatment of minority populations.¹⁴

Slovenia also scores well in its civilian control of the military. After its short military battle for independence and initial democratic elections in 1992, it began its military restructuring program. While under the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), each of Yugoslavia's six provinces contributed troops to the federal military force, which was supplemented by Territorial Defense forces in each province. The Territorial Defense forces were intended to serve as a backup to the JNA in the event of an attack from an outside aggressor. After independence and a new constitution, the Territorial Defense forces were placed under the formal control of the Slovenian government, with the President as commander in chief. In reality, however, the legislative branch and the Minister of Defense have the largest voices in military matters. Slovenian military expert Anton J. Bebler notes that after independence, the military "was placed under strict civilian con-

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trol,” and that the parliament is in full control of defense appropriations.¹⁵ He also notes that a “civilianization” of the Defense Ministry took place, along with greater transparency of all military issues to the public. According to Bebler, a “participatory management style” now characterizes the Slovenian military.¹⁶ Slovenian military professionals are barred from belonging to a political party, which also depoliticizes the military.

Perhaps the only notable problem in the area of civil-military relations has been the temptation of personal aggrandizement of civilian leaders in the Ministry of Defense, especially in the first years of Slovenia’s independence. Such problems initially involved former Defense Minister Janez Jansa, who used his office to appoint political supporters to military leadership posts, created his own special operations forces, and used his office to criticize the President. Before his removal from office, Jansa used his position for his own political gain, and on many occasions acted with minimal or no consultation with the President, effectively placing himself above the President in the military chain of command. While personal competition seems inherent in bureaucratic arrangements, Jansa’s ability to dominate defense affairs was of some concern to analysts.¹⁷ At the same time, the most recent analysis done by NATO’s Membership Action Plan on Slovenia in 2002 gives no attention to past problems in the Defense Ministry, tacitly acknowledging that such problems no longer remain.¹⁸ Jelena Trifunovic notes that problems remain regarding the absence of women as military professionals.¹⁹ Under the current leadership of Defense Minister Anton Grizold, however, Slovenia has an excellent record of civilian and military cooperation that meets the intent of the *Study on NATO Enlargement*.

Another element of the *Study on NATO Enlargement* addressed the importance of resolving any remaining border disputes. In this area Slovenia again should be judged a success. It has resolved all remaining border claims with Italy, Hungary, and Austria. The one border state of some concern has been Croatia. Political differences remain over the ownership of the Krsko nuclear plant, Croatia’s claims over Ljubljanska Bank’s debts claimed by Croatian citizens, and, most important, differences over fishing and drilling rights in Piran Bay. These diplomatic differences are real and remain problematic.²⁰ At the same time, the chances that such problems could become militarily threatening are remote. Petar Stipetic, Cro-

atian Army Chief of General Staff, asserted in May 2002, "Slovene-Croatian military relations are the best in the region."²¹ Although the Croatian border issues represent a lingering source of diplomatic concern, all other border issues are resolved, ostensibly, to NATO's expectations for new members.

It is in the last political measurement of Slovenia that more serious concerns surface: NATO applicants are required to share alliance values. Such an ambiguous benchmark allows for different interpretations over NATO's intent. When examining the government's support of NATO and membership in the alliance, no doubt exists regarding Slovenia's interest and willingness to support the alliance. Support also exists among Slovenia's religious elite, the Slovene Bishops, who have also voted in favor of NATO membership. The vast majority of Slovenia's people identify themselves as Catholic, and the Bishops have noted that NATO shares democratic and moral values worth promoting in Europe.²²

At the same time, however, since NATO's 1997 rejection of Slovenia, a noticeable decrease in public support for NATO membership has developed. In 1997, prior to the Madrid conference, the public's approval for membership in NATO was at its peak. The Defence Studies Research Centre of the Social Studies Institute at the University of Ljubljana found that 60 percent of the public approved of membership prior to Madrid. These approval numbers dropped to 56 percent in 1999 and to 48.3 percent in 2002. The number of those polled who "do not know" if they support Slovenia's membership in NATO has also grown over time. These poll numbers should raise some concern from the allies.²³ The approval numbers are still larger than those who oppose membership, but the polling does raise questions about the current political mood among the wider Slovene population.

The growing opposition seems to be based on a variety of issues. Some Slovenes opposed the National Assembly's 2001 decision to allow its waters to be used by nuclear-powered submarines and submarines with nuclear strike capabilities. The parliament approved the decision in part to allow NATO to conduct training operations in Slovenia's Port of Koper.²⁴ Other concerns stem from the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The argument advanced by some Slovenes, especially the United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD), a party with representation in the National Assembly, is that by allying with NATO, Slovenia decreases its own security and becomes a more likely terrorist target.²⁵ This opposition movement grew in 2002 and the ZLSD was also able to gather 8,000 signatures against NATO membership.²⁶

Such expressions of disapproval are disquieting. When NATO's 1999 Operation Allied Force in Kosovo was in progress, one of NATO's new allies, the Czech Republic, provided only lukewarm support to the bombing campaign. With the mission in progress, Czech parliamentary leaders expressed direct opposition to NATO's objectives in Kosovo. Although Czech President Vaclav Havel eventually became an outspoken supporter of Allied Force, many in the republic's parliament and nearly half its public continued to oppose NATO's

actions. Such opposition, especially from a new ally, was not welcomed by then-NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, and was an embarrassment for the alliance.²⁷ Thus, Slovenia's growing minority factions who oppose NATO membership are troubling.

To deal with the growing domestic opposition, the Slovene government took the important step of disseminating information to its citizens about the benefits of joining NATO by creating a toll-free telephone hotline to answer questions about membership.²⁸ It also has developed a website in conjunction with NATO in an effort to address specific concerns about NATO.²⁹ These steps are important for building support for the alliance, and to alleviate fears about membership. Based on the polling data noted earlier, some of the opposition appears to stem from NATO's 1997 rejection of Slovenia in Madrid. These remaining hard feelings among some in the minority will likely dissipate with a membership invitation. Yet the government and especially the Defense Minister should continue in their domestic lobbying efforts to convince as many Slovenes as possible of the benefits of alliance membership.

Finally, another political concern apart from NATO's 1995 study, but a factor that may hold some sway in the American Senate, is the remaining property claims from Americans who lost land or businesses in Slovenia under former Yugoslav President Tito's leadership. Upon his 2001 appointment as US Ambassador to Slovenia, Johnny Young noted explicitly that these claims would have to be resolved before Slovenia is granted membership into NATO.³⁰ These concerns are being addressed and resolved, which is an important political step for Slovenia as it moves toward full membership in the alliance, but full compliance with American demands would be helpful in eliminating potential problems among US Senators.

In sum, Slovenia generally meets all the political expectations set forth by NATO's enlargement study. Where political problems remain—i.e. its border relations with Croatia and its growing opposition voices to NATO membership—its government is taking the necessary diplomatic and political steps to address these issues. Moreover, the concerns noted above do not override Slovenia's important progress in meeting the vast majority of NATO's political expectations, or the government's outspoken backing for NATO and its strategic objectives in the post-Cold War era.

NATO's Military Expectations

The 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement* also established a set of military expectations for applicant states. These benchmarks include the applicant's ability to contribute to the alliance's security. This vague expectation can be measured in different ways, but generally implies that the applicant has a military that is able to add to the alliance's defense, and implies that the applicant has the financial capability to afford military improvements. The applicant also must have a record of participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace program, which consists of military

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cooperation and training missions between the applicants and current NATO allies. Likewise, the applicant should have experience in peacekeeping operations. The alliance also expects the applicants to meet a “minimal level of interoperability,” which is based on the idea that the alliance is multinational and requires the capability to work jointly in promoting NATO’s defense.³¹

Since gaining independence, Slovenia’s military has undergone considerable transformation, generally along the lines that NATO has suggested. Historically relying on conscription, Slovenia currently has a force size of 7,600 active troops, including approximately 3,500 professionals and 4,100 conscripts, who serve seven-month terms.³² On 14 May 2002 the Slovenian parliament voted to phase out the nation’s conscription policy, which would end in 2007. Moreover, Defence Minister Grizold has expressed his support for a phased elimination of conscription.³³ By doing so, Slovenia takes an important step in simultaneously downsizing and professionalizing its military force, which is an important policy direction that all Vilnius nine states have been encouraged to implement.

In terms of new military equipment, Slovenia has taken modernization steps to improve its rapid reaction and mobilization capabilities. One major program has been the upgrading of approximately 30 T-55 tanks, older armored systems that remained with Slovenia from the Yugoslav government. These tanks now have improved firing and night-vision capabilities and faster mobility. Slovenia also has purchased 28 new armored personnel carriers. The improved T-55s and the new personnel carriers help Slovenia make the case that it does add militarily to the alliance in the event of a future regional political crisis, which is important considering the potentially volatile political conditions in nearby Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. Moreover, these recent improvements unquestionably add to Slovenia’s own defenses, which insulate the country from the argument that it will be a security “free rider.”

In addition to these improvements, Slovenia has taken steps to improve its aircraft and air defense capabilities in order to meet interoperability requirements with other NATO states. Slovenia has upgraded 12 Pilatus PC-9m jet aircraft, which now contain supersonic fighter aviation equipment and allow for training with advanced aircraft technology.³⁴ It also has recently purchased a

short-ranged air-defense missile system from Germany, which also allows Slovenes to learn and better coordinate with NATO missile defense systems.³⁵

Like the other NATO aspirants, Slovenia suffers from serious force-projection limitations. This problem was especially apparent for Slovenia during the US-led war on the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet Slovenia has focused on areas where it potentially can contribute to the alliance meaningfully. Its recent upgrades and purchases move Slovenia in the appropriate direction given its notable limitations.

Besides these quantifiable military measurements, Slovenian membership also brings strategic geographic benefits to the alliance, and thus contributes in other important ways to the alliance's defense. Through its membership, Slovenia would provide a land connection between current NATO allies Italy and Hungary, thus eliminating two "islands" within NATO. It is perhaps not surprising that both states have campaigned actively for Slovenian membership.³⁶ Slovenia's location in southern Europe offers the alliance another important military staging point, if needed, for future operations in the Balkans. Recall that in 1995, the Italian government refused NATO's request to allow the deployment of additional F-117 aircraft to Italy during Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's two-week bombing campaign on the Bosnian Serbs.³⁷ Similarly, Hungary faced political pressures during Operation Allied Force, NATO's bombing campaign against Slobodan Milosevic in 1999, as approximately 300,000 ethnic Hungarians were at risk in northern Yugoslavia, which understandably limited Hungary's ability to act aggressively against Milosevic. Thus, besides the positive result of eliminating two islands within NATO, by admitting Slovenia the alliance would benefit by gaining another supportive and stable ally in the volatile Balkan region.

Slovenia's record in NATO's Partnership for Peace operations also is noteworthy. Slovenia has not only served as a host site for these training programs, but has been an active participant in the program since its inception.³⁸ Slovenia also cooperates in the Multinational Light Land Force with Italy and Hungary in an effort to enhance military interoperability, and in a joint effort to cooperate militarily in the harsh terrain in the region.³⁹ It also provided small troop contributions to the NATO peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as to the peacekeeping efforts in Albania, Cyprus, and the Middle East.⁴⁰

Slovenia's 10-day war for independence also merits some attention. Its ability to defeat the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) in 1991, in actions which cost the lives of only 13 Slovenes and 39 JNA personnel, is best explained as an interplay of political and military factors. Before Slovenia's first democratic elections in 1990, a small number of senior military officials put into place a secret command structure for its Territorial Defense forces. Senior military and political leaders in Slovenia expected that the Yugoslav Federal Republic would assert control over the Territorial Defense forces as Slovenia moved toward independence. The JNA behaved as Slovenian officials anticipated, and the secret

command structure proved crucial, surprising the JNA when Yugoslavia mobilized and attempted to control Slovenia in 1991.⁴¹

Slovenia also benefitted from excellent intelligence on the JNA's military strategy. Slovenes who served in the JNA gave sensitive information to senior Slovene military and political leaders. The information allowed the Territorial Defense forces to wage surprise guerrilla attacks against the JNA. Slovenia also demonstrated excellent coordination between its military and political-media staff. It successfully portrayed itself as the victim of a massive attack by the JNA. The Territorial Defense forces purposely attacked helicopters and tanks in an effort to show the JNA as thrusting its superior weaponry against the under-armed Slovenes. These attacks galvanized the world media and centered attention on Slovenia's resistance. At the same time, Slovenian political leaders cultivated diplomatic ties with key European allies, notably Germany and Austria, who spoke out against the JNA's moves.⁴² Overall, the short war illustrated a well-planned military operation by the Territorial Defense forces, coupled with a highly effective political and diplomatic strategy.

Slovenia's military victory should not be exaggerated: Slobodan Milosevic was not wholly committed to a military operation to prevent Slovenia's independence, and the JNA suffered from low motivation after the initial strikes from the Slovenes.⁴³ Moreover, by its own account, Slovenia could not have held out much longer had the JNA decided to push forward aggressively.⁴⁴ Yet in the end the far superior military forces of the JNA retreated in defeat. This short war demonstrated that Slovenia is able to mobilize quickly, use sensitive intelligence effectively, and coordinate its political, military, and diplomatic tactics to generate widespread support for its cause. The possibility of another military invasion of Slovenia is remote, but Slovenia's actions in 1991 do address those who emphasize the importance of military self-defense among NATO applicants.

Slovenia's defense spending levels have remained consistent, although they still fall below NATO's request of 2.0 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an appropriate goal for all NATO applicants. Since 1998, Slovenia has maintained a steady spending level of 1.4 to 1.5 percent of GDP on military expenditures, with a stated goal of coming closer to 2.0 percent by 2007-08.⁴⁵ If one measures spending per troop, however, Slovenia far surpasses other applicants—which points to Slovenia's small size, but also to the higher degree of military professionalization possible in Slovenia vis-à-vis other applicant states.⁴⁶

In sum, Slovenian membership in NATO would add to the alliance's military security. NATO's military expectations for its applicants are met or are very close to being met by Slovenia in 2002. Its spending levels could be higher, but this is a problem common to other NATO applicants as well as current member states.⁴⁷ The strategic geographic benefits, Slovenia's regional military cooperation, and the recent military upgrades and movements toward force restructuring make Slovenia an attractive NATO member-state. As indicated

earlier, however, its force-projection limitations are notable, which has been highlighted in the current war on terrorism.

Slovenia and the War on Terrorism

In the days following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, for the first time in its history NATO formally invoked Article V of its Charter. Terrorism was a recognized threat in previous alliance ministerial statements, but due to the gravity of the events and new threats present after 9/11, terrorism's saliency among security challenges was more prominent than ever. As the enlargement process unfolded after the strikes, American relations with Russia improved considerably, which to some degree opened the door for wider enlargement.⁴⁸ The war against terrorism, however, may become a new measuring stick, especially in the United States' case, in determining how well NATO's applicants will assist the alliance. Questions of this nature will certainly surface during the ratification process in the US Senate. Some analysts have suggested that military reforms to address terrorist threats should be a critical element in determining who is invited into the alliance.⁴⁹ At NATO's June 2002 Defense Ministerial Meetings, it was also noted explicitly in NATO's Final Communique that current allies must continue to adapt and reform their militaries in order to meet future terrorist challenges.⁵⁰ US Ambassador Young also made this point in a speech before the Slovenian parliament.⁵¹ Thus, although fighting terrorism is not a formal component of the 1995 study on enlargement, it may become a prominent variable as NATO's expansion unfolds.

After the terrorist attacks, Slovenia was quick to state that it would provide the United States unconditional support for the war on terrorism. It promised to share intelligence with the United States and to reform its banking laws in order to better track terrorists' monetary flows.⁵² It also offered cooperation with the United States on its relatively lax travel regulations, which did not require a visa in order to travel from Slovenia to the United States.⁵³

Slovenia also noted, however, that it would not be able to provide troops to support the war on terrorism in Afghanistan because of its poor transport capabilities.⁵⁴ Slovenia did support the war by providing monetary and humanitarian assistance to Afghan civilians. In a January 2002 address, Ambassador Young did not express disappointment with the degree of assistance given.⁵⁵ With little beyond its regional rapid reaction forces, it is not surprising that Slovenia was unable to contribute troops to the conflict. Given its equipment limitations, Slovenia should not be expected to have global reach capabilities. Slovenia's decision not to send ground forces to Afghanistan may also reflect a political decision by its government. If it had experienced any casualties in Afghanistan, public support for membership in NATO could have been damaged considerably.

At the same time, Slovenia's unwillingness to cooperate by providing some military forces is of some concern. While Slovenia's diplomatic statements square firmly with what is expected of applicant states, and its cooperation in other

political fronts is commendable, Slovenia lost an important opportunity to assist the alliance and the United States. Had the real desire existed, Slovenia could have found ways to get troops to the region. Perhaps as a member, when the opposition minority factions may no longer be a threat to Slovenia's membership chances, Slovenia will be a better ally, yet with this first test, the results raise some questions, especially considering the active support that came from other NATO applicants, namely Bulgaria and Romania.⁵⁶ Because of its own domestic political conditions and its aircraft limitations, its decision is understandable. Moreover, given its otherwise extensive bilateral and diplomatic cooperation with the United States and NATO on the war on terrorism, it has done what is necessary of an applicant state. A troop contribution to Afghanistan, however, would have done much to alleviate any lingering doubts about its commitment to fight terrorism.

Conclusion

In its November 2002 Summit in Prague, NATO faces important questions about new members and the future of the alliance. Among the applicants, Slovenia would be a useful addition to the alliance. Slovenia certainly passes NATO's test of a fully functional democracy with civilian control of its military. Its government has expressed unwavering support for NATO's broader strategic mission in Europe and in membership itself. It has also taken the necessary steps to reform its military, especially in the area of regional rapid reaction forces and equipment. Other steps have been taken toward NATO's interoperability requirements. Perhaps most important, Slovenia's geographic location would help the alliance by eliminating two "islands" in Europe, and could provide specific benefits as the need for Balkan stability remains ever-present. In some respects, Slovenia can be compared to current NATO allies Iceland and Luxembourg. Iceland has no military of its own, and Luxembourg offers little to the alliance in terms of military equipment and force-projection capabilities. But they both provide key strategic locations in the Atlantic Ocean and in the heart of Europe, and they are valued members of the alliance.

Some areas of concern still exist: the recent growth in public opposition within Slovenia to membership, and its limited force projection capabilities—especially regarding the war on terrorism—give Slovenia's critics legitimate issues to raise. Yet these problems can be overcome as the government works to improve Slovenes' understanding of NATO. Moreover, given Slovenia's relative small size, the allies' expectations for substantial troop contributions and global troop deployments have to be tempered with realistic assessments. Slovenia also should take steps to resolve its nonthreatening but nonetheless troublesome border differences with Croatia. Slovenia also needs to continue to move toward the 2.0 percent defense spending level requested by NATO. In sum, however, these concerns do not negate the important contributions Slovenia can make to the alliance. NATO will make a wise decision if it extends a membership invitation to Slovenia at the Prague Summit.

NOTES

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