

Enlargement and Institutional Reform: How to make a credible security commitment

The challenges of enlargement are great, but the costs of non-enlargement are greater. Professor **Erik Jones** points out what European policymakers need to consider when committing to enlargement as an investment in peace, security, and stability.

At its meeting last December, the European Council underlined ‘that enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity.’ The Council then set itself the challenge of ‘addressing key questions related to the [European Union’s] priorities and policies as well as its capacity to act.’ In doing so, the Council explicitly recognized that institutional and political reforms are necessary to match power to purpose. ‘This will make the EU stronger and will enhance European sovereignty.’

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That is a bold assertion. The danger is that European power and purpose will fail to align. As enlargement is a necessary investment in peace and stability, this risk should be recognized. The main priority is therefore to match the identified purpose with the power necessary to achieve it.

A commitment to collective security is not enough

For enlargement to succeed as an investment in peace and security, the European Union will somehow have to create (or rely upon) a security guarantee that is credible both to the people who live in those countries that are candidates for membership and to the people who would do harm to them. The assertion of a commitment to collective security is not enough. That commitment must be backed by real political determination. That is why Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is more credible than Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty, despite having intentionally weaker language. (The U.S. negotiators of the North Atlantic Treaty rejected a security guarantee like that found in the Lisbon Treaty as uncredible.) And it is unclear that NATO enlargement will precede EU enlargement as it has in the past. So, the question is how the European Union can make a credible security commitment either to its Eastern partners or to the countries of the Western Balkans.

A staged enlargement like that proposed by Frank Schimmelfennig in his chapter ‘[Fit through Flexibility? Differentiated Integration and Geopolitical EU Enlargement](#)’ could work in that direction. This method, where candidate countries are brought gradually into the European Union depending upon their performance across a range of indicators and their acceptance by existing member states, has implications that raise key questions for the European Union.

How to handle possible threats to the EU's own security

As candidate countries become ever more deeply entangled in the EU economy and its institutional arrangements, the cost of external aggression against those countries – or destabilization within them – will increasingly spill across the rest of the European Union. That spillover creates an incentive for the European Union to push back against any aggressors, and the greater the cost, the greater the incentive. But the implication is that enlargement makes the candidate countries more secure by making the European Union more vulnerable.

Hence, a key question is what the European Union is going to do about that vulnerability both in terms of shoring up its own security and in terms of deterring possible threats. De-risking the European economy is not going to be sufficient, and neither is the use of economic sanctions. On the contrary, both de-risking and sanctions have the effect of channelling potential conflict into the realm of hard security.

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How to overcome internal tension when resources become scarce

A staged accession has further implications. The second is that the progressive entanglement of the candidate countries in the European Union's economy and institutional arrangements will inevitably increase congestion in decision making and competition for scarce resources – which run from market share and employment opportunities to financial assistance, regulatory priorities, and legislative time and attention. This increase in congestion and competition is not the 'fault' of the candidate countries; it is the consequence of enlargement for any club, international organization, or regional polity like the European Union. The point to underscore is that any effort to address this increase in congestion and competition is going to [change the experience of membership for all member states](#) and not just those seeking to gain entry. At the same time, this competition and congestion will make it harder for the European Union to identify new resources to invest in its security and to take difficult decisions about how and how forcefully to push back against any aggression.

If the purpose of enlargement is to invest in peace and security, a key question for the European Union will be to overcome these internal points of tension. It remains to be seen whether existing member states are willing to embrace such an ambitious reform agenda.

How to ensure that candidate countries can pursue necessary reforms

A third implication of a staged accession is that the pace of entanglement is inevitably going to be threat-based as well as merit-based. The countries most in need of a credible security guarantee will have to be brought into the European Union quickly. The governments of those countries will have to engage in the reforms necessary to meet the accession criteria, and the European Commission will have to do the checks necessary to ensure that this approximation of the *acquis communautaire* is meaningful rather than simply pro forma. But none of that can eliminate the security imperative that is the purpose of this kind of 'geostrategic investment'. The evidence for [the accelerating influence of this kind of security imperative](#) can be found in the 'big bang' enlargement that took place at the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s. It can also be seen in the speed with which Ukraine and Moldova have been allowed to start negotiations while Georgia has been given candidate status. So long as the purpose is to promote peace and security, there is little alternative.

Thus, a key question is what the EU can do to ensure the candidate countries can set the necessary pace in terms of their own reform agendas.

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How to reconcile reversibility with the security imperative

A fourth implication of staged accession is that the threat of reversibility necessarily diminishes as the entanglement of the candidate countries in the economy and institutions of the European Union increases. The European Council insists that it 'remains committed to advancing the gradual integration between the European Union and the [Western Balkans] during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner'. The reversibility of integration is important as a check on backsliding in the reform effort made by the candidate countries. What is unclear is how this reversibility can be squared with the need to provide a credible security commitment or at what point the threat of reversing the enlargement process loses credibility in light of the security imperative. Even the economic and political costs of disintegration cut both ways and at some point it may not be worth it for the European Union to go through with its threat to reverse enlargement. There is a clear source of tension here that can also be seen in the aftermath of previous enlargements.

The key question is whether this is a tension that can be resolved through institution building or whether this is something that the European Union is going to have to learn to live with.

No excuses for putting off the enlargement

These key questions should not be used as excuses for European policymakers to try to put off enlargement. The European Council is right to underscore its commitment to making this geostrategic investment in European peace, security, and stability. The prosperity of Europe cannot be assured without that investment, particularly given the political turmoil on the other side of the Atlantic. The challenges of enlargement are great, but the costs of non-enlargement are greater – because failing to provide a credible security commitment to the EU eastern and southeastern neighbours will jeopardize the security of the European Union. The European Council has identified its purpose; now it needs to make sure to exercise the power necessary to secure it.



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Fit for 35 Forum aims at contributing to the discussion on enlargement and reform of the EU. The Forum is set up by SIEPS, initiated and managed by Göran von Sydow (Director) and Valentin Kreilinger (Senior Researcher in Political Science) and edited by Patricia Wadensjö (Editor).