

Possible reform in NATO – “Consensus minus one”?

Due to Greece's veto Macedonia was not invited to join NATO at the Alliance's Summit in Bucharest despite its success to meet all of the necessary membership criteria. Citing the principle of solidarity and consensus, the allies gave in to the Greek pressure and postponed the invitation to Macedonia. The invitation remains open, namely it will be handed over upon settling of the name dispute. These developments seem not to influence the vast support the country's NATO membership enjoys among the citizens, which is still at 85,2 percent, according to the latest poll of the Institute for Democracy. However, not much progress has been made for settling the name dispute.



In light of these events the Canadian Defense Minister Peter McCay recently came up with a proposal to revisit the consensus process in NATO, namely to adopt a “consensus minus one” formula when admitting new members into the Alliance. This means that at least two countries would have to object the accession of a new member which would result in avoiding blockades motivated by (unreasonable) bilateral disputes, especially disputes that have no prospects in being resolved swiftly.

This is currently a prevailing issue because in addition to the Macedonia/Greece problem there are other countries which might face similar problems; such case is Slovenia that is threatening to veto Croatia. The result of “consensus minus one” would be effective isolation of certain member states of NATO. Accordingly Greece would no longer be able to impose its will to prevent Macedonia from joining NATO and all together undermine the enlargement process.

An Alliance such as NATO which in the post-Cold War period has sought to redefine itself and preserve its viability by moving into “out of area” operations should have an internal mechanism to deal with problems such as an obstructive veto. As an increasing number of countries join the Alliance, its security demands increase as well; in the Balkan region Macedonia is undoubtedly an important factor for stability. Macedonia could contribute greatly to NATO's security objectives; this however can be done much more efficiently from within the organization.

PROBLEM: the consensus rule can only be altered by consensus

The former Macedonian ambassador to NATO Nano Ruzin claims that even if this proposal sounds very attractive, it would be very difficult to isolate Greece within NATO. It is obvious that Greece has its political allies; it can be argued that if there was enough political will from all other member states in NATO to admit Macedonia, this would have happened at the summit of Bucharest even without the “consensus minus one” formula. Therefore it remains questionable how efficient such formulas can be amid lack of political will within the Alliance.

However many prominent political figures have openly stated their support for Macedonia. For example the Former NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson has stated that it is a disgrace that Macedonia did not receive an invitation to join NATO due to Greece's objections. Such statements together with the proposal of the Canadian Defense Minister should be greeted as extremely positive for the Macedonian case because they demonstrate that countries which have significant contribution to NATO such as the US and Canada are willing to support Macedonia. Therefore Macedonia should remain hopeful that before long all Alliance members will realize the mutually beneficial relationship between NATO and Macedonia, consequently overcome the name issue and thus contribute to the overall peace, stability and development in Southeast Europe.