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Does Washington Want to Start a New War in the Balkans?

By David Kowalski
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With Monday's procedural vote in the U.S. Senate to allow Montenegro into NATO, the Washington elite proved once more that heightening tensions with Russia might not just be inevitable, but actually desirable. With the exception of Rand Paul (R-KY) and Mike Lee (R-UT), the entire 100-strong body of the Senate rallied behind the motion that would see the tiny Adriatic state admitted into the Atlantic alliance over the objections of many Montenegrins. The vote set off a 30-hour countdown, during which Senators will debate before putting the issue to a final vote.

If you needed more proof that US foreign policy is misguided, just look to what happened to Rand Paul after his earlier decision to block Montenegro's accession. The Kentucky senator was

subjected to a barrage of insults from fellow Republican John McCain, who flatly accused Paul of “working for Vladimir Putin.” McCain warned Paul that objecting to the tiny Balkan state becoming the 29th member of the alliance would play straight into the hands of the Russian president. While certainly unkind, Paul’s retort that the 80-year-old might be “past his prime” and perhaps “a little bit unhinged” was not entirely wide of the mark.

While Montenegro’s accession to NATO bafflingly enjoys popular support in the Senate chamber and among NATO’s 28 member states, 25 of whom have already finalized their approval of the country’s membership of the alliance, criticism of Paul’s veto is as grossly misguided as any assertion that he is somehow in the pocket of the Kremlin. Correctly arguing that the U.S. is already spread far too thinly militarily in dozens of countries all over the world with little to show for it, Paul questioned the wisdom of expanding the monetary and military obligations of America at a time when it is already drowning in debt. He had previously voted against the matter in a vote last December.

McCain represents a mercilessly hawkish wing of the Republican Party that would be quite happy to risk war with Russia and harm to U.S. interests over such a strategically irrelevant country. Paul, on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic position on the country’s NATO ambitions, as should anyone in full possession of the facts. To begin with, the Montenegrin people themselves display little interest in their country joining NATO. Polls there consistently show that no more than 40% of the public favor NATO membership, with support for accession dropping considerably below that figure among older people. Many remain suspicious of the alliance after it bombed Yugoslavia, of which Montenegro was part, in 1999. Distrust for the military alliance is so strong that anti-NATO demonstrations regularly take place across the country. To press ahead with Montenegro’s NATO accession would fly directly in the face of the will of its people.

Worse, Montenegro’s October parliamentary election was marred with exaggerated charges that a Russian coup was in the works. If it hadn’t been for some last minute intelligence from Serbia and the country’s own agencies, so the story goes, Russian GRU spies would have assassinated Djukanovic and would have installed a puppet government. In fact, the pro-Western Podgorica government has successfully used the specter of Russian influence in order to detain and unlawfully harass opposition leaders. Just last week, Marko Milacic, a pro-neutrality campaigner, was “pre-emptively detained” after campaigning in favor of a referendum that would have allowed Montenegrins to vote on whether they want indeed to join NATO.

Aside from the lack of public support, Montenegro has very little to meaningfully contribute to the alliance. Indeed, its accession would seriously undermine the democratic principles on which the transatlantic community was ostensibly founded. The country’s government is widely accepted to be riddled with corruption. Former Prime Minister Milo Dukanovic was named Man of the Year in Organized Crime by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) in 2015, and has been accused of cigarette smuggling on a grand scale in collusion with notorious organized crime groups from Italy, among a litany of other offences any mobster would be proud to have on their resume. Since standing down from his role as Prime Minister last year, Djukanovic has managed to cleverly maneuver the domestic political sphere by

intimidating opposition leaders, while skillfully managing to avoid accusation of a “political crackdown” that would have ignited wide-spread civil unrest.

Montenegro’s accession to full NATO membership should also be viewed as no-brainer from a financial perspective. The fact remains that Podgorica currently spends just 1.6% of its GDP on defense and has a miniscule army. As the Senate Armed Services Chairman, John McCain has been busy campaigning for a greater military budget of \$640 billion for 2018 to entangle U.S. forces in further conflicts abroad, proving once more that the former Presidential candidate is stuck in a Cold War mentality, as evidenced by his suggestion that Paul is some sort of Kremlin plant.

Republicans and the White House must look beyond this bluster and carefully consider the ramifications of allowing Montenegro’s NATO accession. Accepting a country with a failing economy and corrupt government into the alliance will do nothing to further U.S interests either at home or abroad. On the contrary, allowing Montenegro to join NATO would jeopardize both regional and U.S. security, and perpetuate the mistakes of past administrations that have been too quick to bomb foreign countries on a whim and play geopolitical games.

McCain’s tired brand of rampant interventionism should be consigned to the dustbin of history, while the rest of the Senate should take careful note of Paul’s important points. He is one of a rare breed of lawmakers brave enough to criticize America’s imperialism abroad.