

OPINION ANALYSIS

U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY, WASHINGTON DC 20547

USIA

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND MEDIA REACTION

April 15, 1997

M-63-97

British Increasingly Hesitant on NATO Expansion *But Committed to NATO for Own Security*

An underlying theme of British politics, pushed to the fore by the upcoming national elections, is how "European" Britain should be. The debate over British involvement in European integration could have an impact on security thinking. A USIA poll suggests the British public may be less inclined now to support security proposals that extend to all of Europe.

Key Findings:

- The British public is less supportive of NATO expansion than in the past. Far fewer anticipate benefits for European security from expansion and more are unsure of what to expect.
- Poland remains the country most favored by the British for inclusion in NATO. Substantially more would vote for than against admitting Poland or the Czech Republic. Support for other

central and east European nations is less certain or even doubtful.

- The dominant view of NATO among the British public is that it is essential, that it is one of several elements of national security and that the need for it has transcended the Cold War.
- In terms of the upcoming elections in May, NATO is not a particularly divisive issue. Labour supporters are only slightly less likely than Conservatives to deem NATO essential for British security and are equally supportive or skeptical of NATO expansion.
- Fewer than in the past favor increasing the European share of the NATO burden while diminishing the U.S. share. Half favor maintaining the existing distribution of responsibility.

This report is based on a USIA commissioned personal interview survey conducted in Britain in January among 1,000 adults 18 years and older by NOP of London. Sampling error is approximately ± 4 percentage points. Fieldwork was performed prior to the Clinton-Yeltsin Helsinki summit. Interviews for the 1996 survey were conducted by phone.

Fewer See NATO Expansion Furthering European Security Interests

Conceivably as the reality of NATO expansion draws closer -- both because of the approaching decision to admit new members and the corresponding media attention to the issue -- public opinion will become more focused and perhaps more critical. The British public is both less supportive and less certain now than they have been in their views on the expansion of NATO to central and eastern Europe. While a plurality agree that enlarging NATO will "benefit the overall security of Europe," nearly as many feel it will be harmful (Table 1). This represents a substantial change from the two previous surveys when as many as two-thirds anticipated benefits and far fewer were unsure.

	1997	1996	1995	1994
<i>...benefit overall security in Europe</i>	42%	66%	69%	54%
<i>...harm overall security in Europe</i>	36	22	22	27
<i>Don't know</i>	22	12	9	19

Limited Support for Admitting New Members

Since 1995 the British have been generally supportive in principle of extending NATO membership to various central and east European nations. However, when informed of the responsibilities to defend other NATO members and then asked how they would vote in a referendum, support declines (Table 2). Poland and the Czech Republic would likely be favored for admission (in the last three years, Poland has consistently garnered much more support among the British than any of the other candidates). While support for Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria is divided, somewhat more say they would vote against membership for Romania, the Baltic countries or Slovenia. Still, the outcome of an actual referendum in each case is clouded by the fact that a fourth or more are unsure or offer no opinion.

	Poland	Czech Rep.	Hungary	Slovakia	Bulgaria	Romania	Baltic states	Slovenia
<i>For</i>	49%	44%	38%	36%	37%	35%	33%	29%
<i>Against</i>	26	30	36	33	34	40	40	44
<i>Don't know</i>	24	26	26	29	29	25	27	28

The rank order of these countries by British public support for their inclusion in NATO has shifted since 1995 so that those countries receiving the most support are now also the countries most often mentioned in the media as likely to be admitted into NATO. This suggests the important role information plays in shaping typically soft opinion on security topics.

The apparent reluctance to support membership for many central and east European nations is closely related to expectations about the implications for NATO expansion for European security. Among those who expect NATO enlargement to benefit European security, two-thirds or more would vote to include most of the potential members. Those who expect harm would be much more likely to vote against admitting any of the countries.

Fewer Support Moving Quickly on Expansion

As further evidence of hesitancy about NATO expansion, far fewer now (18%) than in the past agree "it is important to expand NATO to include east European countries soon to address the security vacuum in eastern Europe." In 1996 nearly half and in 1995 three in ten favored expanding NATO quickly. Currently, a majority (66%) feel "the West should not move too quickly on expanding NATO because Russia feels threatened by NATO expansion and the West's relations with Russia could worsen as a result." Moreover, a larger proportion (16%) than in the past is now unsure.

Men are more likely than women both to favor a more rapid expansion of NATO to the East and to expect expansion to benefit the European security situation. The better educated are also more inclined to anticipate positive effects for European security from NATO enlargement.

Qualified Consideration for Russian Concerns

Nevertheless, the British public's willingness to accommodate Russian interests is limited. A plurality (37%) agree that Russian concerns should be taken into account but that NATO decisions should be based on the best interests of the alliance and its member states. Only one in five feel NATO should make specific concessions to Russia "such as not stationing troops in new member countries." Another one in four (23%) would deny Russia any role in European security deliberations or NATO issues.

Importantly, those who favor a slower approach to NATO expansion are less inclined to make concessions to Russia than are those who favor moving quickly, suggesting that the desire to proceed cautiously on NATO expansion is not just a reaction to Russian concerns.

Opinion on NATO Expansion Also Related To:

- *Isolationism* -- The minority who advocate Britain staying out of world affairs are much more likely to expect NATO expansion to harm overall security.
- *Confidence in NATO*-- Those with little confidence in NATO's capacity to deal with European problems or who doubt the commitment of NATO members to defend Britain are more likely to think expansion will harm European security.
- *Opinion of the U.S.* -- The more favorable one is toward the U.S., the more inclined to favor expanding soon and to expect NATO expansion to benefit European security.
- *Perception of threat* -- Those concerned that Britain might be attacked by another country tend to expect NATO expansion to harm European security, suggesting that for some a larger NATO does not imply a safer Europe.

- *Value of NATO* -- Those who feel NATO remains essential for national security are more likely to expect benefit from expansion, but even many of these expect harm.

NATO Remains Essential Security Element

Despite the apparent public hesitancy about NATO expansion, the majority of British (69%) remain convinced NATO is essential to their national security.¹ Of this majority, however, far more view NATO as just one element of their national security (76%) rather than the most important element (22%). Of the minority (two in ten) who feel NATO is no longer essential, more would disband NATO (58%) than maintain it anyway (35%). Commitment to NATO among the British has changed little from polls in 1996 (71% said NATO still essential vs. 23% not) and 1995 (69% vs. 22%). Even when reminded of the absence of a Soviet threat, seven in ten believe NATO continues to be needed in order to deal with other security problems.

The value of NATO to the British seems to go beyond the need for national defense or the use of military force to ensure peace. Most of those who favor negotiations over military means to resolve disputes, or who are not concerned about Britain being attacked, are nevertheless supporters of NATO.

A clear factor in the perceived value of NATO is public confidence in the alliance's capacity to deal with European problems. Since 1992, about three-fourths have consistently said they have a fair amount or great deal of confidence in NATO. Only one in five have little or no confidence. Those with a great deal of confidence in NATO are much more likely (29%) to feel it is the most important element in their country's security. Those lacking confidence feel that, at best, NATO is but one element of their national security. They are much more likely to say it is not essential and should be disbanded (51%).

And Fewer Support An Increased Role For Europe

NATO expansion is not the only area where the British public seems increasingly resistant to change in the Alliance. Fewer than in the past favor a redistribution of responsibility in NATO from the U.S. to Europe (Table 3, next page). Half favor the status quo. As one might expect there is a moderate generational effect: the proportion favoring the status quo increases as age increases. Those who have grown used to NATO as it currently exists are less inclined than others to favor change.

¹When asked if NATO is simply "essential" rather than "still essential," the British are slightly more inclined to see value in NATO.

Table 3

One way some people have proposed to deal with post-cold war security issues is to reduce the role of the U.S. in NATO and strengthen the role of western Europe. This would mean Europeans would have a much greater say on issues of western security. However, Europeans would have to spend more money on defense and assume more of the responsibility for the security of western Europe. Which do you think would be best for the security of western Europe...

	1997	1996	1995	1994
<i>keeping the same security relationship with the U.S.</i>	48%	52%	46%	44%
<i>assuming more of the responsibility and control of our security</i>	34	41	51	48
<i>Don't know</i>	17	7	3	8

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Issued by: USIA Office of Research and Media Reaction

How the Poll Was Conducted

This analysis is based primarily on personal interview surveys conducted January 8 - February 4, 1997 in Britain among 1,000 adults, 18 years and older, selected on the basis of a nationwide probability sample. USIA commissioned *NOP* in London to conduct the survey. The questionnaire was designed by the staff of the European Branch, USIA Office of Research and Media Reaction.

In theory, 19 times out of 20, results from samples of this size will differ by no more than about 4 percentage points in either direction from what would be found if it were possible to interview every adult in a given country. Sampling error is larger for subgroups within the population. In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting a survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the results.

Data used in historical trends are from earlier USIA surveys in the same country with the same question wording. In the 1996 surveys, respondents were contacted and interviewed by phone rather than face-to-face.

For further information regarding this analysis, please contact the analyst.