

Strategic Insight

The Big Bang of NATO Enlargement: Goetterdaemmerung or Rebirth?

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At the November 2002 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit, the western alliance invited seven central and eastern European countries—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia—to join its system of collective security. This proverbial "big bang" enlargement of Euro-Atlantic security and defense had, just a few years before, been thought to be impossible. If all goes well, these new members will formally join NATO in the spring of 2004.

How could an organization that many believe is a Cold War relic searching for a mission display such vigor at the Prague summit? What force allows this security and collective defense organization to grow in membership and to assume new missions and functions? This essay highlights the features of endurance and adaptability in NATO that elude many critics and doubters, whose analysis is prone to caricatures of Europeans as freeloaders and defeatists. These critics often overstate the divergent strategic interests between the European NATO nations and the United States. Accepting the relevance of the alliance, the essay explores the tasks of statecraft, security and defense reform connected with NATO's enlargement and strategic realignment.

New Strategic Geography?

Many observers exaggerate European-U.S. differences about policy and strategy and overstate the strategic efficacy of what could be regarded as a battlefield tactical success in Afghanistan. A few points are worth remembering. The United States was itself under attack on September 11th. While some would assert the irrelevance of the Atlantic alliance in the new century, the Bush administration turned to NATO for assistance after 9/11, invoking Article V, which called for the protection of the United States as a NATO ally. NATO airborne early warning aircraft were soon patrolling over North American skies. Such a relationship bespeaks anything but irrelevance, even though the U.S.-European security nexus once deemed essential to international security and stability now receives scant attention in the administration's publicly released strategy documents.

As a basis for the alliance, the authors of the Washington Treaty of 1949 took a page from the Atlantic charter of 1941 and wrote of common Atlantic democratic values that are as constant today as they were when the alliance was created. To be sure, the success of NATO since 1949, along with economic integration which has reached a milestone with the common currency of the European Union, resides to a large degree on this ideal of shared values and measures of mutual aid and self help to promote security, peace and prosperity among the Atlantic democracies.

Too many skeptics on this side of the Atlantic, who glibly write off Europe, wrongly dismiss the power of Article II in union with Article X, the clause on further membership in the alliance. Those

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that would challenge the relevance of the alliance discount the organization's success in helping to neutralize sources of tension and conflict in central and Eastern Europe. This salient fact is now regarded as a "given" on the international landscape. How easy it is to forget the past and assume that these tensions might never emerge to trouble peace and security.

This union of Articles II and X played a leading role in the enlargement of NATO since 1991. This combination of treaty clauses formed a beacon to hearts and minds in Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest, and more recently to those of Bratislava, Tallinn, Ljubljana, and Bucharest. These Europeans wanted real protection, not parasitic security and defense relationships that would leave them in a strategic no man's land as in 1919-1939 and in 1944-1946. NATO membership can finally banish the enduring ill effects of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact (1939) and the Yalta agreements (1945) that divided Europe and prefigured the outbreak of the cold war in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the struggle of bin Ladenism versus the United States, however, many embrace the post-Kosovo strategic dogma that stipulates: "the mission defines the coalition." This pithy maxim draws from a deep vein of anti-European sentiment in the U.S. military experience that reaches directly back to 1917. In this view, there can be little talk of common values when diverging national interests between the United States and the European NATO nations conflict in terms of their response to terror and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This characterization, of course, is flat wrong. Europe and the United States are united in the fight against terror and the proliferation of WMD. U.S. perceptions are further colored by a belief that the Europeans are always wrong about statecraft and public policy from genetically altered food, to ownership of handguns, to the death penalty, to the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy.

But the rhetoric of the debate obscures what actually is happening as Euro-Atlantic security and defense institutions expand eastward. This process began in the early 1990s with the evolution from NATO's "North Atlantic Cooperation Council" (the first mechanism of outreach to Central and Eastern Europe of late 1991) and moved forward with the so-called "Partnership for Peace" of early 1994 (which became the stage prior to formal membership) and on to all out enlargement in 1995-1999, which the United States restricted to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The Bush administration of 2001 has adhered to this policy begun by the Bush administration of 1991. In fact, the latter has sped it up, because Europe is neither a junk heap nor NATO irrelevant. Such statecraft of a "whole and free Europe" makes even more sense for the American national interest in a troubled world after 11 September 2001 than in 1990.

The Virtues of NATO Enlargement

The questions of who should join NATO, and why, have caused episodes of controversy since 1948. The extension of membership via the so-called Membership Action Plan that reached a climax with the 2002 Prague summit has actually been less controversial than those phases of growth that have preceded it. In fact, NATO can be said to have originally "enlarged" in 1948/9 out of the existing Dunkerque and Brussels Pacts (1947/8) whose signatories of France, UK and the Benelux grew to include the twelve of the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Portugal, and Italy. The United States insisted in 1948-9 that peripheral Portugal and yet more distant Iceland be included in the twelve because of strategic geography and that Italy, so recently an Axis trouble-maker and aggressor, be included to defeat a communist fifth column there, despite objections of the continental Europeans. They wanted membership restricted to Western Europe. This constricted idea proved further unfeasible and led, in 1952, eastward to include Greece and Turkey, countries that had wanted to enter in the original enlargement from the Brussels pact to the Washington Treaty.

Profound conflict accompanied the next enlargement, with West Germany's accession to a still born European army and, then, to NATO in 1951-1955. Widespread fears loomed about the

efficacy of the young democracy and the danger that arming a recently created German state might prompt a cabal of rehabilitated Wehrmacht generals to launch a war to re-unify Germany. All too easily forgotten is the domestic controversy of 1981-1986 that surrounded Spain's accession to the Washington treaty in 1982 in the midst of the intermediate nuclear forces missile crisis of the Reagan era. How quickly vanished have been the doubts and conflicts of 1995-1999 about Polish, Czech, and Hungarian accession to the Washington Treaty. Critics asserted before 1999 that such enlargement would cripple alliance decision making for collective defense, bankrupt national treasuries with the costs of defending the meadows and forests of Moravia and the plains of the Hungarian Pusta, and provoke the Russians into a new confrontation that would resemble the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

None of these fears became a reality, although the Hungarian defense reform has collapsed since 1999—a fate shared by neither the Czech Republic nor Poland. The technocratic reservations about central European domestic politics and defense burden sharing, which seemed so persuasive to fussy alliance savants in 1998, have all been rendered a dead letter by the al-Qaeda offensive against the continental United States, Asia and Africa and the call to arms that has followed the tragedies of 2001.

When seen over a longer span of time, the enlargement of NATO since 1989 represents a noteworthy, but generally misunderstood, reform of political culture, diplomacy, security policy, defense institutions and military strategy in Central and Eastern Europe. This process has received too little sympathetic attention in the United States beyond a handful of policy experts and some legislators. Central and Eastern Europe in the modern era have been places where, sadly enough, insecurities arising out of the great power system and domestic politics have burst out of control and caused little wars that then helped to make world wars. This phenomenon has been made worse by local problems of democratic civil-military relations and military professionalism gone wrong because of an aggressive, paranoid style of nationalism, total war and totalitarian ideology. Disinterest has been compounded by an enduring ignorance of, and prejudice against, this part of Europe among many in the West, and a tendency still to describe these lands in much the same terms as did Neville Chamberlain in 1938.

Membership in NATO has helped to correct these defects of statecraft and government, although much remains to be done once a nation is included in the alliance. Anyone who thinks seriously about this part of the world, with a nod to its past from 1848 until 1989, should be thankful that the German/Czech border, as well as the Hungarian/Romanian border are free of trenches, pill boxes, and the kind of random irredentist violence that poisons the Israeli and Palestinian lands. What if fighting like that of ex-Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, to say nothing of the Gaza strip, had broken out in 1991 not only in southeastern Europe, but also on the Oder/Neisse, in the Bohemian Forest, along the Danube and in the Carpathians? What if low intensity irredentist conflict still festered and smoldered in Usti nad Labem (Czechs vs. Germans), Győr (Hungarians vs. Slovaks), Gabčíkovo-Nadmaros (ditto), Timişoara (Hungarians versus Romanians) and Braşov (ditto) at the time of the al Qaeda first strike against New York and Washington? In this counter-factual case, the frictions between the United States and the NATO European powers would likely be considerably sharper and more problematic than the trans-Atlantic contention of 2001/2002.

The Way Forward

In the months to come before Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia formally join NATO, they must accelerate their security, defense and military reforms. These aspirants must respond to the crisis caused by 11 September 2001 and the U.S. call in Fall 2002 for NATO to raise an anti-terror rapid reaction force to operate outside of the Article IV treaty area. Such transformation realigns government, legislatures and armed forces and enhances the capabilities of soldiers to support, and, if need be, fight effectively alongside allies in a wide spectrum of missions and operations over a much wider geographic area. This process

actually began long before the 1999 enlargement, and it has picked up speed since then. The proving ground for this practice began with "Partnership for Peace" national contributions to peacekeeping in ex-Yugoslavia and has led to expanded capabilities in the International Security Assistance Force deployment to Afghanistan. The goal here has not been to create little clones of the U.S. Army, Europe (USAREUR) or the Royal Air Force (RAF); rather it is for each of the seven countries to make a sensible contribution to NATO based on actual requirements and their limited resources. This means creating a greater national commitment to collective defense and a rapid-reaction, commando and ranger-like force structure kitted out with the latest in high-tech command and control.

NATO representatives and national delegations also will agree on a specific set of security and defense reforms for each country; that is, Slovenia will have somewhat different tasks to put in hand before the spring of 2004 than, say, Slovakia. The result of this negotiation will be a timetable, which, in most cases, will require feedback between Brussels and the capitals of the seven NATO candidates after the spring of 2004. This process closely resembles the bi-annual cycle of security and defense joint planning that has operated in NATO, HQ since 1951 and which has been beefed up in the 1990s via enlargement and "Partnership for Peace." Thereafter, NATO staff will prepare the protocols of accession, which require ratification, acceptance or approval according to national practices that vary from case-to-case. After final national discussions or, in fact, a vote in parliament, each of the seven nations shall deposit the instruments of accession with the United States, at the latest by May, 2004.

In a phrase usually used out of context, Lord Ismay said in the early-1950s that NATO served to keep the Americans in Europe, as well as to hold the Germans down, and to keep the Russians out—a trinity of policy and strategy that many skeptics believe has no relevance in the present crisis. Surely, Lord Ismay can be put on his head, to the effect that now one has to keep the Germans up—as in increased defense spending and a willingness to interpret liberally Article 87a of the Basic Law according to the latest NATO strategy of counter-terror and counter-proliferation—and bring the Russians fully into the defenses of the West. The task today involves increasing European will, not just to secure greater combat power, but to continue to do so on the basis of principles of statecraft and strategy in, and among, democracies that have worked more effectively than the many skeptics will allow.

The key issue is to maintain the U.S. link to Europe. To adapt further Lord Ismay's maxim to this moment, one can say that, whatever the many faults, frictions and fatigue of keeping the United States in Europe, the alternative of a United States disengaged from Europe looms as far more dangerous. The efficacy of a new isolationism and all horizons uni-lateralism on the model of Charles Lindbergh's "America First" of 1940 and a post modern interpretation of George Washington's 1796 farewell address may seem alluring to many, but such a policy would cause a diplomatic earthquake, despite all claims to the contrary. The burden of proof of the efficacy of such policy rests on those who would provoke such a diplomatic revolution—particularly in the world of conflict that has erupted since the al-Qaeda attack against the continental United States. If this country is to prevail in the war against al-Qaeda, bin Ladenism, Islamic fascism, and the cult of death visible in the biographies of those figures so prominent since 11 September 2001, then it will have to summon sources of strength within itself as well as within its friends and allies to secure victory. Article II of the Washington Treaty may be more decisive in this connection than the forward air controller Green Beret on his pony with wooden saddle and laptop who spends his days beaming coordinates to the close air support B-52. The central and eastern European endurance of human dignity in the face of arbitrary power and the resistance to totalitarian ideology, as exemplified in Vaclav Havel's biography and Prague's rebirth, strengthens our cause in the struggle against al-Qaeda and bin Ladenist terror that is liable to last as long, if not longer, than the Cold War.

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