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“NATO: A Security Bridge to the 21st Century”

by

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During the 1990s, NATO was transformed to meet the new requirements of security for the era beyond the Cold War. The “New NATO” centered on five goals and purposes:

- To ensure that the United States remained a “European power,” deeply engaged in the full range of issues that could, collectively, be termed “security” – political, economic, and military – as a direct of the original link between the Marshall Plan and NATO’s founding;
- To preserve the best of NATO’s past, including the integrated military commands, which for two generations had ensured that each member state would do its basic defense security, at least within the European theater, on a common base; the provision of a “home” for Germany, a quiet insurance policy to help ensure that the “German problem” would remain a relic of the past; and the fostering (along with the European Union) of a “European Civil Space,” within which war has been abolished as an instrument of nations’ relations with one another;
- To reach out to the states and peoples of Central Europe, helping them to pursue their aspirations of being fully integrated in the West, as free, democratic, capitalist countries, putting behind themselves decades, even centuries, of playing passive roles in European politics and being the locus of tragic conflicts;
- To find a place for Russia in the structure and practice of “Europe” – in terms of security and foreign policy – treating it the way that (West) Germany had been treated after 1945, as opposed to the punitive treatment meted out to post-Imperial Germany in 1919, and providing Russia with the opportunity to play a full role in Continent-wide security, provided it is prepared to “play by the rules” that govern everyone else; meanwhile, to help countries that had emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union reform and democratize their militaries and to underscore their independence; and, as a necessary component of pursuing these four goals,
- To stop open conflict in Europe (former Yugoslavia), to keep the peace, and to provide the security basis for development of societies still struggling to move beyond the ethnic and nationalist tensions and conflicts that had so blighted their histories.

These NATO goals and purposes, allied to other political, social, and economic developments, were remarkable because, for the first time in European history, at least since the founding of nation-states, they offered a chance to create a system of security embracing all the countries of the Continent, what U.S. President George H.W. Bush

called a “Europe whole and free.” It was a “something for everyone” approach – everyone, that is, who was prepared to subordinate individual national ambitions to a common desire to make war progressively “impossible” in Europe – in essence, a new relationship between the concepts of collective defense and collective security.

To these ends, during the 1990s, NATO took a series of steps, all related to an overall strategic idea, in one of history’s few occasions on which concept led to action, rather than the other way around; each step had independent value; but all were related to, and reinforced, one another, in a grand synergy that could, if fully realized, provide a basis for security in Europe that had not been possible before:

- The enlargement of NATO – *viz.*, taking in countries in Central Europe, providing them with security guarantees identical to those enjoyed by prior signatories to the Treaty of Washington, giving them full rights of decision within the North Atlantic Council, and placing their militaries within NATO’s integrated commands and, more particularly, Allied Command Europe;
- The commitment to an “open door” for other countries in Europe to join NATO, provided they subscribe to the required values and practices;
- The creation of the Partnership for Peace (PFP), NATO’s “secret weapon” for reforming and democratizing the militaries of the countries that had emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet internal and external empires (and other European communist states), in order to prepare countries to be NATO allies, give them a sense of participation in Western security while they remained outside the formal alliance structure, and to have a broader, democratic influence on societies at large;
- The creation of an ancillary Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), to give PFP members a forum for consultations and discussion at NATO Headquarters;
- The negotiation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and setting up of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC), in order to give Russia a chance to be engaged with NATO, while remaining outside it;
- The parallel negotiation of the NATO-Ukraine Charter and setting up of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, recognizing the special strategic importance of that country and its bellwether quality in terms of the future of European security overall;
- The reform and modernization of NATO military command structures, to make them relevant to the future, including the development of the new Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) headquarters;

- The deepening of NATO relations with defense efforts of the European Union states, at first through the Western European Union (WEU) and then more directly through the new European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP); and
- A series of efforts to bring peace to the countries that gained identity and independence after the collapse of Yugoslavia, to stabilize that peace, and to help nurture those countries into broader European practices and institutions.

This was an ambitious – virtually unprecedented – agenda; and by the end of the 1990s, all of its elements had been fully developed and several were well on the way to maturity, thus presaging a future of European security that could supersede the uncertainties of the past that had so regularly proved to be so destructive.

Thus, by the time of the April 1999 NATO summit in Washington, the Alliance was taking the key steps needed to bring the 20th century to a close – not just according to the calendar, but, far more consequential, laying a firm basis for resolving, or at least firmly containing, those factors, influences, and historical problems that had so shaped the most destructive century in history.

But what of the 21st century? And what of NATO's role in it? In 1999, NATO's "European vocation" seemed to be quite enough both to justify the alliance's continued existence and to keep the U.S. fully engaged in Europe's security as a top priority – to keep Europe from again reemerging as a geopolitical "problem;" to help safeguard Russia's transition; and to gain an inestimable quality and quantity of influence through continued engagement in, and leadership of, the Western alliance. But already in 1999, there were indications that NATO's vocation – or at least that of the United States – was not to remain riveted on the Continent, itself, or on securing the end of the 20th century's woes.

As early as October 1993, the U.S. had expressed concern to its allies about the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction and the means of delivering them; and at the January 1994 summit, NATO had formally taken on this challenge. But despite the fact that it created three different committees and advisory groups to deal with these issues, nothing of great consequences was done. Even less was done about the possibility that the alliance, or any key member country, would be threatened from abroad by terrorism. Nor did the alliance take up any aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite – or in part perhaps because of – significant differences of viewpoint between the United States and most of its European allies about how peace diplomacy should be conducted. NATO did inaugurate a process called the "Mediterranean dialogue," which has entailed consultations with 7 different countries, but more to assuage the particular concerns of NATO's southern European littoral countries than to engage the alliance as a whole in any significant practical efforts.

Indeed, at the April 1999 NATO summit, in its revised Strategic Concept, the alliance made only passing reference to what, in 2002, are the central issues confronting the United States and, to a lesser degree, most of the other NATO allies: weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. The Strategic Concept contains only one brief paragraph (24) devoted to an issue with which NATO had wrestled for several years as it was undergoing its reform: that is, how far would its mandate extend, beyond the territories formally covered by Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty? The Kosovo conflict was then in full swing; and, although that was not proving to be a “bridge too far,” it was surely, at that point, “the farthest bridge” in denoting areas in which the Alliance, at least as a collective, would be prepared to act militarily. And for its part, terrorism occupied a scant four words – “including acts of terrorism” -- in the Strategic Concept.

Even so, the NATO allies were beginning to wrestle with a set of issues that presaged current debates and differences of viewpoint if not of interests. For one thing, even though the Cold War was long since over, the United States had still retained sizeable military forces, with a military budget equal to that of the world’s next 12 or 13 military powers combined; and it measured more than \$300 billion a year in comparison with the rest of the NATO allies’ approximately \$160 billion. Rapid modernization of U.S. military forces – then called the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and now just “transformation,” – has meant that the capacity of U.S. forces to operate in a complex environment is outdistancing that of most of the allies save Britain. At the same time, the end of the Cold War had led most of the European allies to freeze or even to reduce their military spending (Britain, Turkey, Greece, and lately France being the exceptions). Thus the 1999 NATO summit adopted the so-called Defense Cooperation Initiative (DCI), an ambitious set of 58 efforts at modernizing allied forces, a list far too long to be accomplished, especially against the background of constrained military budgets and a relative lack of understanding about where such modernized forces would actually be employed, certainly beyond Europe – whether on an alliance-wide basis or through so-called coalitions of the willing and able. Indeed, the issue of NATO’s reach continued to plague decisions about what kind of alliance it would be, and what kind of forces its member states would be prepared to develop and finance, including for the new U.S. proposed task of “power projection.”

The events of September 11, 2001, and afterwards have had a profound effect on NATO and its future, just as they have been playing a significant role in reshaping U.S. foreign and national security policy overall. Of course, special concerns of the alliance’s superpower will have a major impact on the alliance; and these concerns are extensions of those foreshadowed in the late 1990s: weapons of mass destruction, the limits of the alliance’s purview farther East, and power projection.

Within a day after the attacks on New York and Washington, for the first time in the alliance’s history NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – which provides that “an armed attack against one or more of the[allies] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.” But it was not the United States which asked for this step; rather, the NATO Secretary General took the initiative, both so that NATO would be formally on record in supporting the United States at a time when it

had been attacked on the mainland for the first time in 180 years; and so that NATO would not be side-lined during whatever military action would ensue. For its part, the U.S. was not interested in having the full alliance involved in what became the war in Afghanistan. Because of the shock of September 11, the need to take prompt action, the special requirements of using high technology weaponry, the relative lack of such weaponry on the part of almost all allies, and the desire of the U.S. to retain full command of military action, it chose instead to pursue its own military course, though it welcomed some ancillary efforts by the alliance (e.g., the shifting of NATO early warning aircraft to U.S. skies), and to have a few allies (beginning with Britain) engaged in Afghanistan under U.S. leadership.

The U.S. enjoyed strong allied support for its war on terrorism “with a global reach” in the initial period after September 11. Allies were genuinely sympathetic to what the U.S. had suffered; there was a history of Americans’ coming to the Europeans’ aid that represented a debt to be repaid; there was concern that the allied superpower not be seen to be seriously damaged without avenging itself – its credibility was at stake; it was necessary to show the terrorists that they could not act with impunity; and the Europeans did not want the United States, the next time Europe needed its help, to stand aloof. However, this sense of solidarity only went so far. For one thing, the U.S. was defining the struggle against terrorism as a “war,” a designation that few allies thought was justified; it was focused almost entirely on attempting to reduce the capacities of terrorists to act and to punish them if they did (for deterrence as well as retribution), while the Europeans also talked about causes, not of the terrorism itself, but of support for terrorism – in Mao Zhe Dong’s phrase, “the sea (of the people) within which the (terrorist) fish swim” – and this included the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict.

In early 2002, the U.S. also turned its attention increasingly to the prospect that countries like Iraq would either acquire weapons of mass destruction – including nuclear weapons—or already had sufficient quantities of chemical and biological weapons to pose a significant threat to its neighbors. President George Bush talked about an “axis of evil” – Iraq, Iran, and North Korea – a phraseology that both caused some unease in Europe for its emotive character and seemed to lump together three different kinds of strategic challenge. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the issue of Iraq, the nature of its regime under Saddam Hussein, its progress in developing WMD, and U.S. resolve to “cleanse” it of these weapons and weapons programs, if not also to effect “regime change” in Baghdad, have dominated debate, not just within individual countries but also within the NATO alliance as a whole.

Taken together, these issues and debates are essentially about a 21st century set of challenges; thus posing a key question – whether the NATO alliance will in the future focus essentially on its European, “20th century” vocation, or will it also broaden to a newer “21st century” vocation, as well?

The NATO summit that takes place in Prague only a week after this conference has thus developed an unofficial agenda that will largely eclipse the formal agenda worked out many months ago. The “formal” plan for Prague has been for NATO to

agree to take in more members – almost certainly 7 countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria); to continue the process of qualifying other countries for joining later; and building still more on the Partnership for Peace. A secondary agenda has been to focus on the military capabilities of allies, now reduced to a few key areas, of which four stand out (and all of which are related, at least in part, to “power projection”): strategic lift (including transport aircraft); logistics; command, control, communications, computers, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (“C4ISR”); and precision-guided munitions (PGMs). Furthermore, the summit will ratify progress made so far in the evolution of NATO-Russian relations, which has focused on the creation, at a summit in Rome last May 28th, to a new NATO-Russia Council (NRC) – in effect, a second try to develop a political and institutional relationship between the alliance and Moscow, after the first effort essentially foundered on differences over the Kosovo conflict. The NRC has a capacity to do little more than the older Permanent Joint Council, but the change has at least been symbolically important. It also reflects the changes that have taken place in Russia’s relations with the United States following September 11, 2001; whether that will also lead to a more intense NATO-Russia relationship, and the possibility that Russia will become engaged in “21st century” NATO perspectives – e.g., the Middle East – is still not clear, although there have been a number of harbingers of such a development.

At Prague, therefore, part of the agenda will be about 20th century NATO (enlargement, “open door,” PFP); and part will be a bridge to 21st century NATO (capabilities and NATO-Russia). But part will also be about the basic question whether in the new century NATO can and will be a central locus for dealing with emerging security concerns that could impact on different allies in different ways – or at least could be perceived as such. In theory, at least, weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (especially Iraq) are a security threat to all allies (especially because of the importance of the region to all the allies, plus the potential vulnerability of most European states directly); but there remain differences of view on the best responses – including the proper role for military force and, if so, who should make the decisions, how much the United Nations must be involved, how a crisis or conflict should be conducted, what should be done afterward, and what other steps should be taken – e.g., regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By contrast, “terrorism” is an issue that is preoccupying the United States more than most other allies, there are differences of view about definition, motives, methods of countering it, and collateral activities that should be pursued (again, with a strong European focus on Israeli-Palestinian relations).

These new challenges, as well as the differences of view (and, to a degree, of perceptions even of differences of interest) will be taxing for NATO as it seeks to define a coherent, commonly-agreed role for the new century – beyond the “20th century agenda” that is still agreed. On this much of the future of the alliance will hang.

These issues are coming to the fore even before Prague. In particular, what role, if any, should there be for NATO in the Iraq crisis – and beyond? This question has been in the air for months. It takes on special importance because of continuing doubts about the future of the alliance, U.S. skepticism about NATO allies’ military competence, and

the conduct so far of the war on terrorism. But how this question is answered will be critical in determining NATO's future – indeed, whether it will have a future at all.

As noted above, on September 12, 2001, the North Atlantic Council invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – providing, in part, that if any member state is attacked, each of the others will take, “individually and with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.” Even though not sought by the United States, this was an important and unprecedented step. And did eventually take part in the war in Afghanistan, with six engaged in the fighting and more in the aftermath, including 12 allied militaries serving with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul. And every NATO nation has played some part in the overall effort to counter global terrorism.

But what about Iraq? Even if the Bush Administration does secure broad allied support for its chosen course of action – either effective, disarming inspections or direct military action against Saddam Hussein's regime – an alliance-wide role for NATO can be ruled out. Just as in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the United States prefers to base both command and force structure on its own resources, and few allies have the modern combat equipment that would be required. Indeed, the limited military capabilities of virtually all NATO allies but Britain – strategic lift, up-to-date command and control, and precision-guided munitions – has been at the heart of ongoing debate about NATO's continued relevance. These limitations intrude even without considering the misgivings of some allies – notably Germany – about making war on Iraq.

But NATO will be involved, if indirectly, simply because of the 53-year history of militaries working together, speaking the same language (English), following the same basic doctrines and procedures, and developing habits of mind and action that have made Allied Command Europe the most effective joint command in history. Whatever NATO allies were to join the U.S. in Iraq, NATO practice and process would be in the background.

The test will come after the Iraq crisis is resolved – through inspections or by war. The aftermath must be sustained Western engagement in the Middle East, including military power, far beyond anything so far conceived. It is not in America's interest to do this alone; local countries would not want the United States to be so visible; and the American people will surely want direct and tangible support from allies. Some of this will need to come in the form of rebuilding and reform – whether just Afghanistan, as today, or potentially including Iraq, tomorrow. That is a task where forging a close U.S. strategic partnership with the European Union will also be critical.

But there will also be shared military tasks – whether to complete the work in Afghanistan and possibly Iraq (including peacekeeping forces needed as backdrop to political, economic, and social change), to play a constabulary role, to combat terrorism, or to help democratize militaries – as NATO's Partnership for Peace has done so effectively in the former Soviet empire. Doing all this would be an important test for

NATO – plus an opportunity to show it can meet the realities of the 21st century's common security challenges.

NATO should also look further ahead. At some point, Israel and Palestine will make peace with one another, but an uneasy peace. Even more than with peace between Israel and Egypt – where U.S. forces have led the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai Desert for the past 20 years – outside military forces, in some form, will be needed in the Israel-Palestine region to build long-term confidence. That necessarily means U.S. forces – and was so understood as long ago as the Carter Administration. It can – and should – also mean NATO. The Alliance should start planning for this eventuality now – indeed, by so doing, it can help inspire confidence among Israelis and Palestinians that they will not be left to fend for themselves.

In wrapping up the strategic challenges of the 20th century, NATO still has a European vocation. For the 21st century, its vocation is in the Middle East – where it must now prove its continued worth.