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The Future of NATO and Transatlantic Relations

1999 was a dramatic year for NATO and Transatlantic relations. On March 12, three new countries, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, joined the Alliance – the first since the end of the Cold War and the first from what used to be the Warsaw Pact. On April 23-25, leaders of 43 nations – the 19 allies plus other members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) – gathered in Washington for a summit meeting that completed half a decade's work in transforming the Alliance into a potentially-effective instrument of European security for the 21st century. Meanwhile, on March 24, NATO began a major air campaign against the Yugoslav Republic that terminated 78 days later with acceptance by President Slobodan Milosevic of NATO's conditions for ending the war over Kosovo, followed by deployment of a peacekeeping „Kosovo Force“ (KFOR) in that beleaguered province.

This series of developments ratified that the old NATO Alliance, originally created to contain communism and Soviet power, had made the leap beyond Cold War and into major responsibility for providing security in a new era, potentially without like in all of European history. In the process, the United States confirmed, once again, that it is a true „European power“, ready to exercise responsibilities and to impress its own role upon the Continent.

The „New NATO“, as it is often called, was the product of a series of actions taken during the middle part of the 1990s, according to an encompassing worldview and following a set of strategies and tactics designed to implement that worldview. Rarely in international politics has such a series of developments taken place in such a rational and orderly way. This reflected, in part, a great deal of allied experience with the core conditions of building European security. In part it was testimony to sustained American leadership of the Alliance; and in part it resulted from the readiness of the NATO allies to make the changes required to move beyond Cold War practice and process – using, in effect, a tried and true instrument to serve new ends.

NATO's Four Key Goals

By 1999, it was clear that NATO had assumed major duties in pursuit of four key goals. Two were extensions of the past: first, to ensure America's continued commitment to, and active role in, European security, for the indefinite future, as a reflection of U.S. interests and values; and, second, to preserve the best of NATO's past. The latter included helping to provide a confident home for Germany – ensuring that this „settled“ European problem remains „settled“; to prevent the renationalization of defense on the part of the allied member states; and to help reinforce a great historic development among the 15 members of the European Union (EU): that they have abolished war as a means of their relations with one another, creating a European Civil Space.

But two of NATO's goals reflect new aspirations. One is to play its part – along with the EU, bilateral relationships, and domestic developments – in providing confidence to nations and peoples of Central Europe that they are full members of the Western community, certain of their strategic future, and no longer simply the objects or victims of great-power politics. And NATO's final goal, perhaps most difficult of all, is to reach out to Russia, complementing other efforts to help it succeed at home as a democracy, with a market-oriented economy, and – if it is prepared to do so – to play a major and legitimate role in European security, consonant with the interests of other states.

NATO's Initiatives

In pursuit of these goals, the NATO allies undertook a series of distinct but complementary efforts, each designed to achieve a specific purpose, but all related to one another, potentially to help every nation in Europe gain something positive for its security from the total construct, and for none to find that its long-term security is somehow diminished. This was an effort to create what President George Bush had called a „Europe whole and free“. Indeed, this is the first generation ever to have a chance to create such a system of European security. NATO's objective, in fact, is to move beyond outmoded concepts of buffer states, gray areas, and spheres of influence; and even to see whether it is possible, in time, to do something across Europe that has already been achieved in the Western part: to move beyond the balance of power as a central organizing principle of European security.

Most attention has been paid to NATO enlargement, or expansion – the taking in of new members. Equally important has been the allies' commitment to keep the door open to other applicants, indeed, to any European country „ready and willing to shoulder the responsibilities“ of membership in this military alliance. Thus at NATO's Madrid summit in 1997, the 16 allies agreed to take in three countries. All three had demonstrated major efforts to adapt their politics, economics, and military forces to meet Western and NATO requirements; each had abandoned any residual claims against its neighbors; all lie between the heartland of Western Europe and Russia; and two – Poland and the Czech Republic – border on Germany, thus helping it to achieve a key aspiration of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl: to surround Germany with both NATO and the EU, so that its rising influence within Europe will be as part of these great institutions rather than just as a national development.

NATO enlargement and the „open door“, however, are only part of NATO's effort to expand the zone of security Eastward. As important has been the creation of the Partnership for Peace (PFP), an association of the NATO allies and 24 countries that either emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact or were classic European neutral states. From its adoption at the Brussels NATO summit in January 1994, PFP has had two main purposes: to help countries wanting to join NATO to begin adapting their militaries in order to pass muster with allied parliaments; and to ensure that countries that do not join NATO, at least not at first, are able to be deeply engaged in the work of the Alliance. This helps them gain a significant degree of confidence that they are within the NATO „family“. Thus these PFP members send representatives to NATO's political and military headquarters, adopt allied military standards and budget methods, train their forces with NATO, take part in military exercises with NATO, and even go into the field – as in the Bosnia and Kosovo peacekeeping forces – on the same footing as members of the Alliance. And PFP has been a remarkable success, not just helping to transform military institutions but also aiding in the democratic reform of other aspects of society.

In parallel with Partnership for Peace, the allies also created an additional political forum, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, that gives members of PFP a place within NATO headquarters for raising their particular concerns and taking part in at least some of the diplomatic life of the Alliance.

These efforts were all designed primarily with the Central European states in mind. But the allies also recognized that lasting security in Europe must take critical account of the special qualities and importance of both Russia and Ukraine: the former as the one country which, if internal reform fails and it reverts to its imperial past, could pose fundamental challenge to security on the Continent; the latter as a principle test both of the capacity for communist societies to transform themselves and of the potential for transmuted the basic structure and practices of security in the European heartland.

Thus the NATO allies were diligent in trying to draw Russia out of its isolation and to play a constructive role in European security – but clearly within the common rules and on the basis of NATO’s playing a leading role. Russia did eventually join the Partnership for Peace, and in 1996 it did send 1400 peacekeepers to Bosnia as part of the NATO-led Implementation and Stabilization Forces (IFOR/SFOR). Then, in May 1997, the sixteen NATO heads of state and government met in Paris to conclude with Russian President Boris Yeltsin a NATO-Russia Founding Act. This agreement recognized the security requirements of the NATO allies, but it also created a NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, sketched out a wide range of potential areas of NATO-Russia cooperation, and forecast the possibility of forging a „strategic partnership“. Through these political and institutional arrangements, the allies and Russia began a lengthy process of exploring whether they could find common ground regarding Europe’s strategic future.

At the same time, the allies recognized the special position and status of Ukraine; and they concluded a NATO-Ukraine Charter and set up a NATO-Ukraine Commission at NATO headquarters, designed to create a „distinctive partnership“ between the two. This was politically significant, but one step below the relationship envisioned for NATO’s engagement with Russia.

As it designed its future structure to meet its four key goals, NATO also set about reshaping itself. Through its so-called Long-Term Study, it redesigned its military commands; radically reduced their number (from 63 to 20); reoriented NATO’s military posture away from static confrontation in the center of Europe that had characterized the Cold War period; and emphasized both territorial defense and peacekeeping. In the process, NATO created a new Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) headquarters, designed to permit rapid deployment of forces to undertake specific tasks, as in peacemaking or peacekeeping.

Finally, the NATO allies responded to desires expressed by European states wishing to bolster integration, through the European Union, with a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI). At the same time, the United States had both ended its ambivalence about the creation of a European capacity to take military action outside the NATO framework and saw potential for some redress of the balance of military burdens shouldered by allies on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Thus NATO negotiated with the Western European Union (WEU) – formal agent for the ESDI – the development of European capacities within NATO that could nonetheless be separated out for use by WEU. These include „separable but not separate“ headquarters, staff, a strategic commander for WEU, and other NATO „assets“ – in particular, some military equipment where the U.S. holds the lion’s share among allies.

The Demands of Bosnia

As early as 1995, it was becoming clear that this array of NATO efforts – some completed, some in the process of construction – offered major promise for 21st century European security. Equally important, from the perspective of the allies, NATO had shown itself capable of transforming itself from a Cold War instrument to one able to undertake future challenges. But all this architecture tended to ignore one critical factor: the reality of conflict in Europe, precisely in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This posed a practical challenge, not to the creation of grand designs that could embrace the Continent, but to the capacity of the Atlantic Alliance to deal with strife and conflict in its own neighborhood.

The conflict in Bosnia did not appear to be a strategic problem. It was taking place in a remote corner of the Balkans, far from the center of Europe, a product of national disintegration rather than external threat. As early as 1992, all the European great powers – including the United States and Russia – had tacitly agreed that the conflict should be

contained: come what may, it would not be permitted to spread beyond its confines to produce wider war in Europe. But as fighting in Bosnia continued, it became increasingly obvious that this was also becoming a test for NATO and its future – whether the allies were prepared to stop the only active conflict in Europe. In effect, the Bosnia War had been contained strategically, but neither politically nor morally; and stopping it became a crucial measure of NATO's relevance for the future.

Following the Bosnian Serb slaughter of Muslims at Srebrenica in July 1995, NATO finally decided to act. In parallel with a Croat-Muslim ground campaign and Franco-British artillery attacks against Bosnian Serb weapons, NATO launched a 20-day air campaign, ostensibly to help protect so-called Safe Areas established by the United Nations but in fact to force the Bosnian Serbs to the peace table. The war ended, followed by the Dayton Accords and the introduction of a NATO-led peacekeeping force (IFOR/SFOR), composed of all 16 NATO allies and many other countries, including 14 from the Partnership for Peace. This force „held the ring“ and prevented a renewal of fighting, while waiting to see whether it would be possible to build a functioning, civil society out of Bosnia's wreckage.

The Kosovo Challenge

But Bosnia was not the only challenge to NATO's relevance – the test it had to pass to gain political and moral authority for pursuit of its broader European security goals. By 1998, the Yugoslav province of Kosovo was in flames, a combination of repression by the government in Belgrade and guerrilla actions by the newly-emerged Kosovo Liberation Army. Once again, however, NATO temporized in the face of Yugoslav conflict, this time with many allied leaders' issuing threats of military action that the Alliance as a whole was not prepared to honor. In October 1998, Yugoslav President Milosevic agreed to halt his military actions. But by January 1999, it was clear that he was bent on resuming his brutal persecution of the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo. Yet NATO did not respond to Milosevic's clear violation of his commitments, even after a slaughter of civilians in the town of Racak. Instead, the so-called Contact Group of five Western states (plus Russia) sought to negotiate an end to fighting, and in two rounds of talks between the parties – at Rambouillet and

Paris – tried to impose a settlement. When this was rejected by the Serbs, NATO began its bombing campaign on March 24.

It rapidly became clear that the Alliance was unprepared for what happened next. Instead of promptly accepting allied demands, as some allied leaders were convinced he would do, Milosevic instead accelerated his campaign of ethnic cleansing, in the process killing many thousands of Albanian Kosovars – including many leaders of society – expelling about 800.000 others from Kosovo, and creating several hundred thousand more „internally displaced persons“. For their part, the NATO allies were unwilling to incur the risks either of a military ground campaign or of low-level air attacks directly against Serb forces in Kosovo. This reflected the perceived difficulties of preserving popular and political support for NATO military action – and hence the cohesion of the 19 members of the Alliance. This was doubly difficult since the allies did not have a strategic stake in Kosovo, as such. Instead, they acted out of a combination of humanitarian concern and worries about preserving the Alliance's credibility – neither a firm foundation for asking national publics to risk the lives of their soldiers.

Thus NATO turned to a strategic bombing campaign against targets throughout Yugoslavia, designed to affect Milosevic's will to continue the war. That meant, of course, that one of NATO's key objectives in the war, to protect Albanian Kosovars, went tragically unfulfilled. NATO also turned to Russia to help with diplomacy, especially to show Milosevic that he could not look to Moscow for support. Then, following both an intensification of

NATO's strategic bombing campaign and Russian acquiescence with NATO's basic objectives for ending the war, Milosevic finally agreed in June to accept allied terms. These were an end to the war; removal of Serb fighters; introduction of an international force to Kosovo; return of refugees; and some form of control for the ethnic Albanians over their own lives.

The Long-Term Impact of the Kosovo War

In the grand sweep of European history and perhaps, in time, even of post-Cold War history, the Kosovo War was not a major event. But it has great significance for the future of NATO, in virtually every element of its aspirations and activities. The Kosovo War was only the second time that the Alliance had used serious military force, and its first sustained campaign conducted over many weeks. It demonstrated the ability of different allied militaries to work closely together in complex operations. This was quiet testimony to all the hard work done since the early days of the Bosnia conflict to forge an effective allied air-power instrument for the post-Cold War era. And it also reflected the ability of the now-19 allies to hold together even under great political stress. This was itself a remarkable feat, given the serious misgivings about the conduct of the war in countries like Germany, Greece, Italy, and Hungary. And it also testified to the power that a NATO decision had, once taken, to induce continued allied unity in the collective interest of preserving NATO solidarity.

When and Where NATO Will Act

Further, the Kosovo War had an impact on two propositions that for some time had been keenly debated within the Alliance. The first was whether NATO could take military action, in circumstances other than direct attack on an allied state, without the formal blessing either of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or of the United Nations Security Council. Most allied states had deep misgivings about acting without such legal authority. Faced by a likely Russian UN veto over Kosovo, however, they agreed to launch the NATO air campaign anyway. Yet many allies concluded from experience in the war that they would be reluctant to follow this course, again.

The second proposition was whether the NATO Alliance would become engaged militarily well beyond Europe – in the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, Transcaucasus, or even farther afield. The United States has argued for a more ambitious NATO, in view of its judgment about emerging threats to Western interests. By contrast, many of the European allies have been more circumspect, except in face of a clear threat to common interests, such as another direct challenge to Persian Gulf oil supplies like that posed by Iraq in 1990. Again, the Kosovo War seemed to resolve debate, at least for the time being. Despite the success of the NATO air campaign, most allies are now very reluctant to consider further military ventures, certainly beyond Europe. Thus the United States or other allies interested in becoming engaged, militarily, at far remove will likely have to count on so-called coalitions of the willing – i.e., allies prepared to take part on a bilateral basis – rather than on the Alliance as a whole.

NATO and Southeast Europe

Meanwhile, the aftermath of the Kosovo War is having a direct impact on NATO's long-term geographic orientation. Already, with the admission to NATO membership of three states in the center of Europe, that part of the Continent has seemed to pose reduced requirements for immediate allied action, especially with the continuing success of Partnership for Peace. Not so the Balkans and southeast Europe in general. It is no accident

that the weight of U.S. military power has now shifted from north to south of the Alps: U.S. Air Forces in Europe are now primarily based in Italy; the Sixth Fleet has acquired a day-to-day significance even greater than during the Cold War; and U.S. Army forces, while still staged from Germany, are increasingly active in southeast Europe.

Equally important, the combination of the Bosnia and Kosovo Wars, along with the burdens subsequently assumed by NATO and other Western institutions, means that this region now clearly engages Western involvement and commitment. Neither the Bosnia-based Stabilization Force-SFOR (though now reduced in size) nor the Kosovo-based KFOR will be able to depart anytime soon. The West, including to a significant degree NATO, has accepted responsibility for helping to reconstruct societies and even to help with nation-building – a most formidable and unpromising task. The fact that Milosevic remains in power in Serbia; that Montenegro, in particular, still remains vulnerable to Serbia; that there is no formal agreement or even informal understanding about Kosovo's long-term future; that Albania's future is uncertain and that Macedonia is under intense pressure from its own ethnic Albanian minority – all these imponderables mean that NATO must remain militarily and politically engaged in the Balkans for the foreseeable future.

In addition, as the allies look farther East – to the Near East, Persian Gulf, and Transcaucasus – they must recognize that pursuing stability in southeast Europe is an important element of a long-term regional strategy. Thus even that classic unresolved triangle of problems, Greece-Turkey-Cyprus, poses as much or more of a risk for the Alliance than during the Cold War, and Turkey's domestic situation remains troubling. At the very least, therefore, NATO and the West, generally, face the need for a comprehensive, long-term, costly, and committed Balkan and southeast Europe strategy, in their own regional self-interest and as part of an overall approach to European security.

In sum, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the wars over Bosnia and Kosovo have given these two small and remote places a greater strategic significance than either of them merited on its own.

Balancing Interests in Central Europe and Russia

What happened in Kosovo in 1999 is also likely to have an impact on NATO's broader agenda of stabilizing Central Europe and reaching out to Russia. NATO's strategy for European security, discussed above, struck a balance between these two parts of the Continent. The Kosovo War has called that balance into question. On the one hand, the war demonstrated to Central European states that major uncertainties still persist. Accordingly, several of them are pressing even harder to join NATO. By contrast, a number of current allies, which had earlier viewed NATO enlargement as essentially serving political, social, and economic ends rather than entailing realistic military responsibilities, now suddenly realize that extending the NATO mandate can confer real commitment and the possibility of military action. Thus these allies are viewing decisions about NATO enlargement in a much more serious light, and their willingness to take more countries into the alliance is even less robust than before.

On the other hand, the unwillingness of NATO allies to run significant risks of taking casualties in Kosovo led them to engage Russia far more deeply in diplomacy than would have been necessary if they had been prepared to settle matters militarily on their own. There was some merit in engaging Russia, both to help Russian democrats who felt threatened politically by the NATO air campaign and to draw Moscow into the outside world. But from Russia's point of view, playing an important role in bringing the war to a end, essentially on NATO's terms, entitled it to compensation. This fell into at least four areas: Western support for the Russian economy; a Russian role in post-war Kosovo; a change in NATO's practice of

making sovereign decisions, where Russia so far has had only a „voice but not a veto“; and a halt to further NATO enlargement, especially extending to countries formerly part of the Soviet Union and, in particular, the three Baltic Republics.

The West acceded, at least in part, to the first two Russian requests, although it pledged little in concrete economic help and NATO refused to give Russia a separate military command in Kosovo. But most allies will resist acceding to the last two requests and will want NATO to regain its essential freedom of maneuver. Nevertheless, several allies – perhaps the majority – are now more sensitive to Moscow’s concerns, especially because of worries about the prospects for Russian democracy. Thus there is less allied support than before for a bold strategy of NATO enlargement.

In brief, there is risk that the balance between Central Europe and Russia in NATO’s perspective will shift toward the latter. If this does happen, NATO will be hard-pressed to fulfill its fundamental goal of ensuring that all European nations gain an increased sense of security from its overall efforts. And, unless the Russians learn to move beyond their historic reliance on great-power politics, the old European geopolitics could gain greater play, at least in the Balkans, as opposed to the newer Western vision of placing greater reliance for European security on shared interests and institutional integration.

NATO and the European Union – CFSP and ESDI

Finally, the War in Kosovo is influencing the way in which NATO and the EU’s foreign policy and security institutions relate to one another – in essence, the military-political relationship between the United States and its European allies. The Kosovo War dramatized the increasing gap between U.S. and European military capabilities, at least to prosecute a high-tech war with few or no allied casualties. This is intensifying U.S. pressure on allies to increase their capacity for high-tech warfare, including for so-called power projection beyond the Continent. The United States places particular emphasis on the Defense Capabilities Initiative that was adopted at the April 1999 NATO summit and on the ability of European and American militaries to work effectively together – to be „interoperable“. At the same time, the Kosovo experience has led European states to express an increased desire to have significant military-political capabilities and processes of their own, so that they do not have to be so dependent upon the United States.

But neither of these political developments should be taken at face value. The United States would like its allies to have a greater capacity for high-tech warfare. But it also welcomes the added political influence in Europe and the high degree of dominance over the conduct of NATO military operations that flow from its military preeminence. For their part, the European Union states want to develop their Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – along with the renamed European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) – but they must also recognize that the Kosovo War teaches the opposite lesson: that major military action in or around Europe requires a functioning alliance, which for many years ahead must mean NATO; and it requires military capabilities far beyond what any European state is prepared to develop, and that means the continued involvement of the United States. Both Americans and Europeans already agree that it would be a waste of money – and would be politically untenable – for the latter to develop a wholly separate set of military capabilities, especially when the United States is likely to be engaged in any serious military challenge affecting Europe.

In the final analysis, therefore, the existing bargain between NATO and the Western European Union is still best: for the Europeans to have access to NATO capabilities „separable but not separate“ from the Alliance as a whole. Of course, there remains great value in developing the CFSP and ESDI, as part of European integration. But one major

pitfall must be avoided. European rhetoric about the prospects for independent military action must not outstrip reality, lest the United States mistakenly believes it can do less for European security in the future.

Proving NATO's Worth for the Future

Thus 1999 has been a consequential year for NATO and transatlantic security relations. But while the Kosovo War tested each part of NATO's ambitions and its ability to respond to new events, on the whole it did well. It passed the critical requirement of relevance to European security in the post-Cold War world. Perhaps most important, all allies, on both sides of the Atlantic, worked together in everything that NATO did. Rather than driving the Europeans and the North Americans apart or creating some new crisis of confidence – despite the high stress of the Kosovo conflict – the events of 1999 pulled the Alliance together in its essential elements, not least ratifying America's long-term engagement as a European power. That is a good basis for beginning the 21st century in European security.

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