

NATO`S FUTURE. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON A NEW ERA IN THE HISTORY OF THE ALLIANCE

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In the field of security policy, 2009 will be marked by two outstanding events: Barack Obama will assume the presidency of the US, and NATO will celebrate its 60th anniversary. Both these events offer an occasion to ask questions about the future development of the Atlantic defence alliance. After all, the results of the NATO summit that was held in Bucharest in April did not make everyone happy, for they did not include a new strategic concept. Moreover, Ukraine and Georgia missed the bus for the membership action plan, and Macedonia's wish to join in the near future remained unfulfilled. Croatia and Albania are the only countries that may have better prospects.

Three key questions obtrude themselves: What is NATO's present perception of itself and of its role in the future? Where are the limits of the enlargement policy of the alliance? And what is the part played by Russia in NATO's political considerations as well as in the security structure of Europe?

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been confronted by a dilemma. The first point at issue concerned the functions which the alliance might have left, although it is often hyped as the ideal tool for resolving any security-policy challenge. While it is certain that reforms did get under way when former Warsaw Pact states joined NATO, NATO's function as an initiator of political transformation has faded by now. Any further pursuit of the enlargement policy would meet with internal criticism. And, finally, the threat situation of the West changed radically after September 11, 2001.

However, this very analysis contains the reasons why the alliance might act as a global security provider in the future. Thus, it might direct its activities against global terrorism, against players that cannot be brought to book, and against other sources of global insecurity. In this respect, the standard by which NATO's quality would be measured would be the success of its military operations.

In political terms, the alliance will soon have to make a historic decision regarding its future orientation, for which three variants have emerged. The first is a reduced version of NATO whose function as an Atlantic alliance on the classical pattern would be restricted to defending the territory of its members against direct attack. In the second version, the alliance is seen as a 'global fire brigade' which would have to respond to crises everywhere in the world. In the third, it is a tool to promote the interests of its member states and their partners. This last variant especially would have to be based

on a broad definition of interests which might even solve the dilemma between irrelevance and overstretching.

Not all political obstacles that bar the way to a future-oriented NATO have been overcome as yet. There are five problems that are particularly urgent: First, it is indispensable to find a formulation for the alliance's proper interests that will hold water. Second, the relationship between NATO as a global security agency on the one hand and the UN on the other has to be clarified. Third, public information and persuasion needs to be stepped up in many member countries, Germany included. Fourth, NATO has to highlight its core function as a military organization again. And fifth, money would have to be found to finance that organization.

The question about NATO's sustainability also relates to its borders. Today, political transformation has disappeared from its schedule of tasks. To be sure, its eastern enlargement was a success, but that enlargement must now be consolidated. Security experts are increasingly calling for 'flexible pragmatism'. They welcome the decision made at Bucharest to accept Croatia and Albania into the alliance because both countries have met the requirements of the membership action plan. At the same time, there is the cautionary example of other states where conditions deteriorated below the accession requirements once they had received their membership status. This appears to call for a permanent review mechanism.

And yet, Brussels is anxious to obviate a debate about the borders of the alliance so as not to paralyze the energy for political modernization in those east European states where accession to NATO triggered a reform movement.

At the same time, critics of any further pursuit of the eastern enlargement policy are growing more vociferous, especially as the recent war in Georgia showed that a) any further enlargement might dump a hot war with Russia in NATO's lap, and b) that co-opting countries with unsolved regional conflicts entails obvious drawbacks. As NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer put it, new members should present the alliance with 'added values, not added problems'.

There is also an internal debate about the question of global membership. Even today, NATO promotes the interests of the West in numerous missions, occasionally supported by partners outside its territory, such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea. At the moment, however, the idea of a global membership seems not popular enough for a majority, for it would paralyze NATO's decision-making capability and change its configuration noticeably.

In any discussion about NATO's future, Russia must be considered as a factor. The intention should be to integrate Moscow as a strategic partner in the plans of the West, not to provoke it. The self-confidence of the Russian Federation has grown under President Putin, and so has the clarity with which Russia formulates its objections to NATO's eastern enlargement. Another unambiguous signal was set during the war in Georgia, although Moscow was almost left alone when it unilaterally recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the impact of this demonstration of power was considerably reduced by the defective solidarity shown by, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

However, there are other issues which demonstrate how far the opinions of Russia and the West diverge. These include, for example, America's plans to set up a rocket shield with elements in Poland and Czechia, the independence of the Kosovo, and the interpretation of the CSE Treaty. Russia's leaders are past masters at staging themselves as opponents of America's predominance, although all that posturing almost hides the fact that Moscow and NATO were cooperating fairly closely up to the war in Georgia. In the medium term, too, the two sides will probably go on collaborating, particularly as there are so many fields of potential cooperation.

And indeed, there are many things which both sides have in common. NATO should use these things as a lever to strengthen the ties between Russia and the West. The alliance has already passed through two phases, one as a military alliance against the Warsaw Pact in the era of the Cold War, and another as a promoter of political transformation in the east European states that were dependent on Moscow at the time, whose integration in the West NATO encouraged after the downfall of the Soviet Union. At present, it appears as if a third phase was commencing, with NATO now acting as a global player within the framework of a broadly-defined defence mission. Against this background, the alliance would not be well advised to carry on with Russia as an opponent. Russia, in turn, would be well advised not to lose sight of the great value which cooperation with the West has as a strategically meaningful option.

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