Central Europe and NATO: Still Married, but in Need of Counseling

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Summary

Two decades into its post-Cold War transformation, NATO’s continued utility as the premier transatlantic security organization is in question. Faced with two critical challenges: a possible strategic failure of the International Security Assistance (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and the inability to come to grips with the consequences of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war in South Ossetia, NATO is at risk of becoming a hollowed out political echo chamber. Divided over future eastward enlargement, reluctant to spend more to enhance its military capabilities and confronted by a revisionist Russia, the alliance seems unable to balance its expeditionary focus with territorial defense requirements. Nowhere is this more keenly exhibited than in Central Europe, where the South Ossetia war fundamentally changed the geostrategic environment, raising the specter of a new fault line forming along NATO’s Eastern border. Today, as the Obama Administration formulates its domestic policy agenda, grapples with global security challenges and seeks the “reset” in U.S. relations with Russia, Central Europe must adapt to the declining defensive value of the alliance on which it has staked its security.

Introduction

The exuberance across Central Europe which accompanied the 1999 round of NATO enlargement is today a decade-old memory, eclipsed by a growing uncertainty about the long-term viability of the alliance central to its security. Though masked by officially-professed optimism, anxiety in Central Europe over NATO’s survivability is escalating in the wake of the decline of the United States as a global power, deepening strains within the alliance over the war in Afghanistan and a resurgent geo-strategically assertive Russia on the region’s Eastern periphery. There is also growing realization among key states in Central Europe, especially in Poland, that hopes for special relations with the United States to augment membership in NATO proved to be widely optimistic. Today, Central Europe confronts important questions about the value of Article 5 security guarantees and contingency plans for countries such as the Baltic States, where there is only a symbolic NATO military presence. In the meantime, the new U.S. Administration ranks the region low on its list of foreign policy priorities.

Europe’s greatest supporters of NATO and the United States are in Central and Southeastern Europe, where the wounds of Russian occupation and control remain fresh. Furthermore, in contrast to the “old allies” from Western Europe, the new democracies believe that traditional geo-strategic imperatives have not
died with the Cold War. For Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the oldest of the post-communist entrants, NATO’s utility still rests ultimately on the core value of Article 5 understood in terms of territorial defense. Following the Estonian-Russian confrontation in 2007, that is even truer for the Baltic States. They believe that the NATO enlargement project needs to proceed and the transatlantic community should remain focused on assisting pro-Western governments on NATO’s Eastern flank in building democratic institutions and strengthening their ties to the transatlantic community. The Central European position on enlargement was admittedly more easily accepted in Brussels and Washington during the strategic pause of the 1990s, and even during the two terms of President George W. Bush, than it is today during the Obama Administration. Since President Obama has placed a much greater emphasis on the “reset” in U.S-Russia relations, to garner Moscow’s support on nuclear non-proliferation, Iran, North Korea and Afghanistan, Central Europeans have seen their already limited influence with Washington decline.

Today, there is a growing concern in Central Europe that, two decades after the collapse of communism, Washington is indifferent to the region. The open letter to President Obama published in July 2009 and signed by such key figures as Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, charging that the Administration has neglected the region as it seeks improved relations with Russia, was a manifestation of the deteriorating relationship between Central Europe and the United States. The public expression of distrust, signed by 22 intellectuals and former leaders representing the most pro-American states in Europe, was a plea to reverse the trend. It was also a call for Washington to square the Obama Administration’s desire to move cautiously on eastern enlargement without impacting continued support in the region for Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO. The letter was ultimately a question about the geo-strategic landscape of the region in the next decade, and most directly about the future of trans-Atlanticism. Despite the White House’s reassurances, these questions remain in the wake of America’s shift in missile defense policy.

The “Quid pro Quo” Alliance

In their views on NATO, the countries of Central Europe resemble an unhappy husband, who sees no alternative but to live with the spouse he does not particularly like while still longing for the blushing bride he married. Central Europe supports NATO as it exists today, and in its limited way continues to contribute to the expeditionary capabilities of the alliance. But its principle rationale for seeking NATO membership remains what it has always been: protecting its regained sovereignty. Central Europeans have hoped that by doing their part for the “new NATO,” they would preserve more of the “old NATO” in the process. But the region has reason to worry.
The central problem of NATO since the end of the Cold War, swept under the rug amidst the official optimism of each consecutive summit, has been its inability to generate consensus on the nature of the threats confronting the alliance, resulting in its continued inability to rally behind a shared mission. In contrast to the Cold War-era, where the overarching threat posed by the Warsaw Pact ultimately suppressed differences among individual member-states, the regional differences on security optics have defined distinctly different visions. During the strategic pause of the 1990s, and especially when NATO engaged out-of-area in the Balkans along the periphery of Europe, those differences were not as apparent as they are today. The key question after the Balkan wars was whether the “expeditionary capabilities” of the alliance could be enhanced in accordance with U.S. strategy. For the “old Europeans,” the Balkan wars were an exception rather than a precedent-setting conflict defining future missions. Splitting the difference, the “new Europeans” sided with the Americans, believing that such *quid pro quo* would entitle them to reciprocity in a crisis.

The Balkan-era internal NATO debate occurred largely outside of Central Europe, as the applicants were concerned with meeting internal admissibility criteria rather than presuming to be part of the larger debate on NATO’s purpose. When NATO went to war in 1999, the new allies supported the Balkan campaign as best they could, providing airfields or limited ground contingents for post-war stability operations. It did not take much, however, to recognize that the views on NATO held by Central Europeans diverged considerably from those of the Western European allies. Seeing the United States as the pivotal force in the alliance, they hewed to the U.S. position on strategy but wanted the NATO of the past, an Article V collective defense alliance committed to the security of its members.

Today, a number of key European states, France and Germany in particular, have all but rejected the U.S. approach, focusing more on the political dimension of cooperative security based on a community of values. For Central Europeans after the South Ossetia war, the alliance has become even more about Article 5 security guarantees. The “new allies” continue to endorse the U.S. position, but with the growing realization that U.S. support for the region is qualified. When Poland sent troops to Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition, it did so not because of Middle Eastern terrorism, but because it wanted closer ties with the United States. Warsaw believed its efforts would secure reciprocal American backing in Central Europe. Similar political calculation entered into the Polish purchase of F-16 fighter aircraft, into the U.S.-Czech agreement on the radar component of the erstwhile long-range U.S. missile shield and in the subsequent agreement between the visibly cautious Tusk government in Poland to site U.S. missile interceptors on Polish territory. All those decisions were driven by the conviction
that real agreements backed by real U.S. assets would bring a closer level of security cooperation with the United States than actually has been the case. The promises made by the bride and groom in the honeymoon phase of their courtship are a distant memory.

Today, in contrast to the initial heady days in Warsaw or Prague, the mood is more somber. The reluctance of the Obama White House to expend political capital on behalf of Central Europe has generated a level of anxiety not seen in the region since 1989. Differences between the West and Central Europe on how NATO is to be defined remain, while the growing Americanization of the Afghan war raises serious questions about how Washington will see NATO’s long-term utility. As Defense Secretary Gates put it in Munich in 2008, we cannot become a two-tiered alliance of those who fight and those who do not.

The Guns of Georgia and NATO’s Eastern Periphery

The 2008 Russo-Georgian war delivered a profound shock across Central Europe, prompting the largely ineffective effort by Poland’s President Lech Kaczynski and the presidents of the Baltic States to galvanize NATO and the European Union into a stronger response to the Russian invasion of South Ossetia. Although the leaders of Central Europe are under no illusion about Georgian President Mikhael Saakashvili’s ineptitude and culpability during the crisis, they have been worried by the relative lack of response from the West, especially under the French Presidency of the EU. In the end, repeated trips to Russia by President Nicolas Sarkozy did not prevent the Russian takeover of sovereign Georgian territory, with virtually no Georgian voice heard in the process. Coming on the heels of confrontations between Russia and the states on the Eastern periphery of NATO, the South Ossetia war became a powerful symbol in Central Europe of a new era in Russia-NATO relations, prompting calls from the region to revisit the meaning of Article 5 and refocus on territorial defense.

The Russo-Georgian conflict raised the prospect for the first time since 1990 of a state-on-state war along NATO’s Eastern periphery. It prompted fresh concerns about the ability of NATO to respond with one voice to Moscow’s pressure, and left no doubt in the capitals of Central Europe that the Russian Federation was now clearly a revisionist power, defining its geo-strategic environment in terms of traditional spheres of influence. Even if some of the West European capitals share this view, they do not regard it as seriously as does Central Europe. While the Western Europeans have publically condemned Moscow’s invasion of Georgia, warnings that Russia might continue on a similar path have been largely dismissed as traditional Russo-phobia of the Central Europeans and the Baltic States.
In short, while the “guns of August” of 2008 rattled the Eastern flank of NATO, they have not fundamentally changed the intra-NATO dynamic. Today the “three NATOs” continue on their separate trajectories: the United States focuses on the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, notwithstanding the unwillingness of the West Europeans to contribute more; Western Europe wants to limit the scope of NATO’s global commitments and continues to engage Moscow; while Central Europe, especially the Polish and Baltic governments, focus on the growing threat of a revisionist Russia.

Arguably the greatest source of anxiety in Central Europe has been the willingness of the Obama Administration to consign the “new allies” to the second tier of priorities as it sorts through a hoped-for bargain with Russia. The prospects for further NATO enlargement to the East are closing fast. There is no longer much talk in Washington or Brussels about timetables for Ukraine or Georgia beyond general declarations that the process will remain open. It seems that Moscow’s brief campaign in South Ossetia has achieved the fundamental objective that eluded the Russians for two decades: it has halted NATO’s eastward enlargement. Seen from the perspective of Warsaw, Prague or Bucharest, this carries a risk of a new fault-line forming along NATO’s eastern periphery, with Georgia taken out of play for NATO membership, Ukraine now firmly a contested territory and the Baltic States in a vulnerable geostrategic position vis-à-vis Russia, notwithstanding their membership in NATO and the EU.

In the environment in which Washington’s attention on foreign policy remains on Afghanistan and the Middle East, and as the Obama Administration seeks to enlist Russian support, the capitals of Central Europe have pressed to reaffirm NATO’s commitment to Article 5 and territorial defense, but with limited success. In Krakow in February 2009, then-NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Schaffer spoke for the first time of the imperative of out-of-area missions and territorial defense as two parts of a common approach. Presented as one of six recommendations, it was welcomed in the region as a signal that NATO might take into account the lessons of the Russo-Georgian war. But there was little follow up beyond mothing debate for rapid deployment reinforcements to defend exposed areas. With Washington focused on other priorities, the concerns of the states on the Eastern shoulder of the alliance have become peripheral.

What Next?

In the present political climate, the critical challenge for Central Europe will be to bring about a greater appreciation of the increasingly fluid security situation in the region. Paradoxically, the fate of the territorial vs. expeditionary mission of NATO hinges to a large extent on the long-term prospects of ISAF. From
Washington’s point of view, the continued utility of NATO – and therefore of the importance of U.S. commitment to transatlantic security – rests on the ability of the alliance to “deliver security where needed.” Much of the criticism of Europe’s limited contributions to NATO during the Bush administration could be explained in terms of limited political support at home for a European government willing to back U.S. policy. Such arguments are much less credible today. As the Obama Administration considers a potential surge of up to 70,000 troops in Afghanistan, the rest of NATO provides a real fighting strength of 12,000 to 15,000 (from the total of 30,000 caveated forces deployed under ISAF). Even without the surge, the Afghan war under the Obama Administration is essentially a U.S. campaign, just as it was during the Bush Administration.

From Washington’s perspective, if NATO cannot contribute to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, what is its function? In this context it is difficult to argue that NATO is capable of genuine burden-sharing, with a rather ironic reversal of the “quid pro quo NATO” that the Central Europeans seemed to want during the Bush years. The prospect of NATO’s strategic failure in Afghanistan looks with every passing month more like the failure of European will to follow through on the commitment undertaken as far back as September 2006 to secure the country. It is therefore critical for the Central Europeans to contribute to ISAF to boost its prospects for success, helping to ensure that the U.S. will continue its commitment to NATO as a viable transatlantic security organization. In the end, whether the Obama Administration decides to maintain its commitment to Afghanistan, or if it chooses to disengage, the Central Europeans will have done all in their power to preserve the viability of the alliance.

The task of establishing a sense of shared risk in the alliance will remain the single most difficult challenge facing NATO because the regional optics continue to strain the internal dynamic of the alliance. The risk for Central Europe is that as the Obama Administration further deemphasizes the importance of the region, the effort to reconcile territorial defense with the expeditionary mission of NATO will fail.

It may indeed be that NATO has outlived its utility as a military security organization, and if it is to continue to provide a policy forum it has to become what its U.S. critics have warned about all along: an alliance a’ la carte. If that is the case, the Central Europeans will be caught up in an unconquerable dilemma as the immediate beneficiaries of NATO’s transformation into a political project. In 1999, this allowed them to move into the rarified Western security club, something of which the greatest optimists could only dream. They will also be the innocent victims, as NATO ceases to function as a defense organization with clearly defined areas of operation, contingency planning in place for their
defense and strong military capabilities to provide for credible deterrence and defense.

The irony of the transformation of NATO would then lie in the very success of the enlargement process. Alliances are first and foremost against something, and only derivatively serve to support shared values or common projects. As post-1989 NATO opted to redefine itself through conditionality and norm-setting, it might have over-reached its fundamental defensive role to remain the core foundation of Euro-Atlantic security. The political project was a resounding success; the military side of the equation proved much less so.

The last and arguably the most intractable problem for NATO is the question of resources. If the pressure to rebalance in NATO’s strategy between the “expeditionary” NATO and the demands of territorial defense is to have any hope of success, it must address squarely the paucity of resources and the unwillingness of the majority of European allies to contribute more for defense. Among the “old European” NATO allies, only four have sustained defense spending levels in 2008 at the accepted baseline of 2% of GDP: the United Kingdom, France, Greece and Turkey. Among the “new Europeans,” only Bulgaria was at the level of two percent of GDP on defense. Amidst the current economic crisis, all defense budgets in Europe are vulnerable. But without resources, the notion of meaningful contingency planning will continue to lack substance.

The existential question facing NATO is, in the end, straightforward: is it still intent on being a defensive alliance with meaningful military capabilities, or will it continue to devolve into a political echo chamber. Unless there is a consensus on the shared threat, and therefore a shared mission on security concerns, the shape of things to come is clear: what is left of the alliance will linger and the bureaucratic frameworks will remain, but NATO’s defensive utility will be progressively nullified.

For the Central Europeans, the current trends may in fact constitute a new chapter on security policy. If NATO fades into history and the United States continues its current trajectory of dealing with Russia while minimizing concerns of Central Europeans, the future of regional security will depend on how the Franco-German tandem defines the direction of European integration and to what extent future EU relations with Russia will accommodate Central Europe. Although the priorities of Paris and Berlin will not always align with those of Warsaw or Tallinn, as the Eastern Partnerships seems to suggest, Central Europe may learn that a broader perspective on key aspects of Eastern policy could yet be achieved across the EU.
After a decade into its NATO membership and five years in the EU, Central Europe has to consider the real possibility that the 27-member bloc will emerge as the default security actor, in part because the United States shows little interest in sustaining the relationships built over two decades of post-communist transformation. If indeed, Washington is prepared to push for the “reset” in relations with Moscow, wagering a degree of Western influence in Ukraine and Georgia and trading radar and missile bases in the Czech Republic and Poland for an arms control deal, there will be considerable damage to America’s standing in the region. Should this scenario come to pass, the United States will find it very difficult to sustain the close cooperative relationships with Central Europe that it enjoys today, and it will find that NATO will have been eclipsed by internal EU security policy.

So today the Central Europeans need more than political gestures of good will to reassure them that the United States remains committed to their security and that it values their support. We need to rebalance the political and military aspects of NATO by expanding the area of military cooperation, starting with a serious dialogue about security needs in the region. We should work on contingency plans that are matched by requisite military capabilities to ensure that they are credible.

The demise of the NATO alliance has been predicted on many occasions, only to be revived by yet another optimistic summit declaration. This time may be different. The South Ossetia war has injected a new element into the NATO dynamic, polarizing the alliance not over U.S. policy priorities, but for the first time since the 1999 enlargement, over the differing optics on their most vital security interests in Europe. Today more than ever before, the polemic is an intra-European NATO debate. It is regrettable that Washington does not seem to be paying attention.