48. Problems with the New NATO

Congress should

- refuse to appropriate funds for any ''out-of-area'' NATO military missions;
- pass a joint resolution opposing any further expansion of the alliance beyond the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic already approved by the Senate;
- pass a joint resolution specifically opposing any NATO military intervention in Kosovo;
- pass legislation requiring the withdrawal of all U.S. forces stationed in Europe by 2005; and
- conduct a comprehensive debate about whether continued U.S. membership in NATO serves American interests—especially in light of the alliance's change of focus from territorial defense to murky peacekeeping missions.

The decision taken by NATO leaders at the Madrid summit in 1997 to invite Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join the alliance was a watershed event. Not merely was the alliance to be enlarged; that had occurred before. But for the first time NATO proposed to undertake security responsibilities in Central and Eastern Europe. There also appear to be no discernible limits to the potential enlargement of the alliance. President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright emphasize that NATO membership is theoretically open to any European democracy. Albright has gone even further, asserting that no democratic country will be excluded because of where it is located on the map—a clear reference to the aspirations of the three Baltic republics.

While NATO develops plans to enlarge its membership, another equally momentous change is taking place in the alliance. When NATO was first established in 1949, it was explicitly an alliance to defend the territorial

integrity of its member states. Indeed, the North Atlantic Treaty contained a provision describing the region to be covered, lest there be any implication that the United States was undertaking the protection of the colonial holdings of its new West European allies.

NATO forces never fired a shot in anger during the Cold War, and the alliance's first military operation did not involve the defense of a member from attack. Instead, that initial mission took place in Bosnia, with NATO aircraft bombing Bosnian Serb positions and the alliance trying to prop up the Muslim-dominated government in Sarajevo. Later, NATO took responsibility for implementing the Dayton Accords by deploying a peacekeeping contingent in Bosnia, where it remains to this day.

Surprisingly few people in the United States or Western Europe pointed out that the Bosnia mission was a stark departure from NATO's original purpose or questioned whether it was authorized under the provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty. Yet the Bosnian Serbs never attacked or even threatened to attack a NATO member. Sending NATO troops on such an ''out-of-area'' mission was a dramatic transformation of the alliance's rationale. But the treaty had never been amended, nor has such a change been debated by Congress or the parliaments of the other NATO members.

Only recently have thoughtful members of Congress and experts in the foreign policy community raised questions about the implications of the expansion of NATO's membership and the transformation of NATO's purpose. The two innovations are closely linked, and there are ample reasons to be worried about both of them.

Many proponents of enlargement insist that a new NATO—something more akin to a Euro-Atlantic collective security organization than to a traditional military alliance—is evolving. That spin is evident in President Clinton's comment that ''NATO, initially conceived to face a clear-cut and massive threat, is now a lighter, more flexible organization adapted to its new crisis management and peacekeeping missions. This alliance that is renovating itself is no longer that of the Cold War.''

Such remarks reveal an ignorance of the profound differences between collective *security* organizations and military alliances, or collective *defense* organizations. The former have two notable characteristics: They tend to be ineffectual ''talk shops'' rather than serious security mechanisms; the League of Nations and the United Nations are classic examples. They also, by definition, must be as inclusive as possible. Alliances, on the other hand, are selective and exclusionary; they are invariably directed (either implicitly or explicitly) against an identifiable adversary.

NATO cannot become a collective security organization unless it admits virtually all European nations—which would make it nearly congruent with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But not all European nations will be admitted; after the first round of enlargement, there will still be as many European countries left outside NATO's tent as there will be on the inside.

The Clinton administration is apparently attempting to create a weird hybrid entity—part traditional alliance and part collective security organization. That objective is apparent from another Clinton comment: ''We are building a new NATO. It will remain the strongest alliance in history, with smaller, more flexible forces, prepared to fight for our defense, but also trained for peacekeeping.'' He added, ''It will be an alliance directed no longer against a hostile bloc of nations, but instead designed to advance the security of every democracy in Europe—NATO's old members, new members, and non-members alike.''

That statement reflects a dangerous conceptual muddle. The American people are likely to end up with the worst of both worlds: a NATO that periodically becomes entangled in messy, Bosnia-style peacekeeping missions in disputes that have little, if any, relevance to vital American interests and a NATO that is obligated to protect the alliance's new members in Central and Eastern Europe from a threat posed by one of their neighbors—including their great power neighbor, Russia.

Both scenarios are worrisome. There is little doubt that the Clinton foreign policy team sees the Bosnia mission as a model for future NATO enterprises. Indeed, the transformation of NATO's focus has been both breathtaking and alarming. It was once an alliance to keep Western Europe—a major strategic and economic prize—out of the orbit of an aggressively expansionist superpower, the Soviet Union. It has now become the baby sitter of the Balkans. Not content with the futile and seemingly endless nation-building mission in Bosnia, NATO is meddling in the conflict between Serbia and its restive, predominantly Albanian province of Kosovo.

As the leader of the ''new NATO,'' the United States is incurring expensive and thankless responsibilities. The Bosnia mission has already cost American taxpayers nearly $10 billion, and the meter is still running. If the United States is foolish enough to lead a NATO intervention in Kosovo, the financial costs will mount and the lives of American military personnel will be at risk. Yet NATO continues to threaten to intervene unless Serbia stops trying to suppress the secessionist insurrection in

Kosovo. Alliance military planners have already developed contingency plans for such an intervention.

Even the out-of-area adventures in the Balkans do not fully satisfy the ambitions of some ''new NATO'' enthusiasts. Former secretary of state Warren Christopher and former secretary of defense William Perry suggest that the alliance become an instrument for the projection of force wherever in the world ''Western interests'' are threatened. In a moment of exuberance, Albright stated that NATO should be prepared to deal with unpleasant developments ''from the Middle East to Central Africa.''

The prospect of U.S. and other NATO troops being used as armed social workers in vague out-of-area crusades is bad enough, but the other scenario may be even more troubling. For all the propaganda about the ''new NATO'' and its more political orientation, NATO remains a military alliance that is obliged to protect its members from armed attack from *any* source. As NATO incorporates the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, that obligation could entangle the United States in parochial disputes involving a new member and one of its neighbors. Even Clinton belatedly acknowledged the seriousness of the proliferating commitments during his May 31, 1997, commencement address to graduates at West Point: ''In the years ahead, [NATO expansion] means that you could be asked to put your lives on the line for a new NATO member, just as today you can be called upon to defend the freedom of our allies in Western Europe.''

Alliance obligations might even put the United States in the middle of a conflict between two NATO members—something that Washington already frets about because of the bad blood between Greece and Turkey. Since Central and Eastern Europe are cauldrons of unresolved religious, ethnic, and territorial problems, such nightmare scenarios are more than remote possibilities.

Most ominous of all, Russia has important strategic, economic, and cultural interests throughout much of Eastern Europe going back generations and, in some cases, centuries. It also has a daunting array of grievances, some spurious, some legitimate, with its various neighbors. Extending security commitments to nations in what Moscow regards as its geopolitical ''back yard'' virtually invites a challenge at some point. Although that may not be an immediate danger, given the disarray of the Russian military, one cannot assume that Russia will remain weak forever.

A Russian challenge, now or in the future, would create a horrific dilemma for the United States. Washington would have to renege on treaty

obligations to its new allies or risk war with a nuclear-armed great power. The former option would leave American credibility in ruins; the latter option might leave America itself in ruins.

Congress needs to take immediate steps to limit the risks arising from America's involvement in the new, post–Cold War version of NATO. At the very least, Congress should explicitly repudiate the administration's attempt to convert the alliance into a force to police the Balkans. That means passing legislation to terminate the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and to prohibit U.S. participation in any NATO intervention in Kosovo. More generally, Congress should pass a joint resolution barring funding for out-of-area NATO missions and affirming that the alliance's only legitimate mission, as authorized in the North Atlantic Treaty, is to protect the territories of member states. Finally, Congress ought to express clear opposition to any expansion of the alliance's membership beyond Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which have already been invited to join.

Those measures, however, are only interim, damage-limitation steps. There is an urgent need for Congress to then reassess America's entire commitment to NATO. Such a debate would end NATO supporters' reflexive habit of regarding the preservation of the alliance as a goal in itself. The proper goal is the protection of vital American security interests. NATO (or any other institution) is merely a means to that end and ought to be retained only if the benefits of preservation decisively outweigh the potential costs and risks. It is not at all clear that the ''new NATO'' passes that test.

A comprehensive congressional debate on NATO's purpose might lead to long-overdue changes in Washington's European policy. For example, a continued U.S. troop presence in Europe is an issue that is separable from U.S. membership in the alliance. When NATO was founded, Washington did not contemplate stationing U.S. forces on the Continent as part of the commitment. Indeed, the Truman administration assured the Senate that the United States would not provide a troop presence. The administration later sent troops to Europe because of the tense global environment caused by the Korean War, but even then assurances were given that it was merely a temporary step until the West Europeans achieved full recovery from the devastation of World War II.

If a U.S. troop presence was not deemed an indispensable corollary to America's NATO membership in 1949—during one of the most

dangerous periods of the Cold War—it should certainly not be viewed as such in the far more benign post–Cold War European security environment. The 106th Congress should finally fulfill President Truman's promise and bring home the troops ''temporarily'' deployed to Europe in 1951.

Such a decision would also signal a willingness to examine the ultimate foreign policy sacred cow: continued U.S. membership in NATO. Despite the concerted efforts of U.S. and European leaders to create a ''new NATO'' and make it relevant to the post–Cold War era, the alliance is intrinsically a Cold War relic. It was designed to provide a U.S. security shield for a demoralized, war-ravaged Western Europe facing an aggressively expansionist totalitarian adversary. That situation bears no resemblance to the current security environment. It was one thing to suggest that a weak Western Europe could not defend itself against a military superpower. It is something quite different to argue that a prosperous Western Europe cannot be a strategic counterweight to a Russia shorn of its empire and East European satellite buffer states or deal with the security problems caused by the likes of Slobodan Milosevic.

Congress should consider whether it is time to insist that the West Europeans provide for their own defense and take responsibility for maintaining security and stability in their own region instead of clinging to the American security blanket. At least one institutional mechanism, the Western European Union (the military alliance of 10 West European countries) is a possible successor to NATO. The United States would have the option of establishing a limited security relationship with that entity—as a hedge against developments in Europe that might have a serious effect on important American interests. Under such a system, however, Europeans would finally have primary responsibility for the security of Europe, and America's risk exposure would be appropriately limited.

Suggested Readings

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