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NATO: From Marginalization to Globalization

Lyubomir Ivanov

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November 21 2002 was a great moment of history, the true importance of which is yet to be analyzed, understood and appreciated. Only some initial and fairly fragmentary thoughts inspired by the Prague Summit are presented here.

Together with six other Central and East European countries, Bulgaria is joining the family of Atlantic nations. This happens thanks to the achievements of the invited seven, which have carried out both substantial reforms in the security sector and have proved reliable allies during the conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Should the need arise, they would undoubtedly act accordingly in a possible Iraq operation as well.

The invitation extended in Prague reflects the appreciable trust of NATO's nineteen member states. Besides, Bulgaria owes special thanks to Turkey and Greece for their joint initiative in supporting the membership of Bulgaria and Romania. We highly value the resulting unprecedented cooperation between the four leading Balkan nations as an expression of new partnership spirit in the Balkans that ought to be kept and further developed in the future.

Bulgaria has seen thirteen years of effort materialize in a well-deserved success, which has been celebrated throughout the

country. Even in Sofia the Atlantic Club held a party with more than 4,000 participants, where the Golden Award of the Club was presented to thirteen persons, both Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians, for their exceptional contribution to fostering the Atlantic values in Bulgaria and enhancing the role of civil society in the security sector.

However, as NATO's Secretary-General Lord Robertson warned us in Prague, the new members should not only celebrate, but should take the Summit's decisions with great responsibility. I would like to reflect very briefly here upon the principal aspects of the Alliance's transformation as decided in Prague, focusing on Bulgaria's place in that transformation.

Marginalize or Globalize?

For some time before Prague, NATO had been facing the dilemma of either to marginalize or to change. In Prague the Alliance opted for change, determined to overcome its decision-making deficiency and enhance its inadequate military capabilities. These pressing problems are well illustrated by the degrees of involvement or non-involvement of NATO in Kosovo, Afghanistan and today Iraq, where one sees the United States once again looking for a coalition of the willing, instead of having NATO deploy its Response Force (that indeed does not yet exist).



Despite the enlargement and radical transformation launched in Prague, NATO's identity crisis has not been resolved. The big NATO enlargement in Europe has already happened in Prague. The remaining candidates will join when ready – Albania, Macedonia, Croatia, then Ukraine, the Caucasian republics, etc. – and probably still later OSCE members such as Russia and the Central Asian republics that could be regarded as a political if not geographical extension of Europe. However, the present doubts about the future of NATO are most likely to keep hanging around unless and until the Alliance admits its inevitable global role, and expands not just its activities but also its membership beyond Europe and North America.

As already noted by some analysts, the present NATO enlargement reflects the post-Cold War geostrategic configuration, whereas the pivotal importance of Germany for the Alliance during the Cold War has been replaced by the equally pivotal importance of Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Indeed, it is precisely the Balkan flank of NATO that faces the arc of instability extending from Algeria to the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central and South Asia.

The present geostrategic configuration is likely to stay in place until the Alliance is expanded into East Asia and the Pacific, South America and Africa. In this respect, one of the most significant decisions of the Prague Summit has been to initiate the process of

transforming NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue into more practical partnership, possibly following the Partnership for Peace pattern.

It could be that very few in NATO today would be prepared to admit that the Alliance might ever assume any global role. However, as reminded by Lord Robertson in Prague, how many people believed back in 1990 that NATO would ever incorporate former enemies from Central and Eastern Europe? Well I happen to know the answer. Indeed, together with three other members of the Bulgarian Parliament I had the opportunity to visit NATO Headquarters in 1990, and discussed this issue with a number of people there. Except for NATO's then Secretary-General Manfred Wörner and a couple of others, the overwhelming reaction was most skeptical. Such enlargement of NATO in Central and Eastern Europe was deemed unthinkable, not to happen in the next fifty years they said. Yet that enlargement is a fact of life already! Today one sees very much the same skepticism about a possible global role for NATO – what is new?

Some Political Angles

Looking at the political dimension of the Prague Summit, the very fact that the Summit succeeded in making decisions that had been impossible before is most encouraging. Furthermore, it is my expectation that due to the comfortably lower levels of Anti-

View of the media centre (Photo: NATO Photo)

Americanism inherent in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the ten CEE Allies may help narrow the political gap between America and Europe. Their participation could possibly increase the efficiency of NATO decision-making by changing the balance among European Allies toward a more responsible European policy in defense and security, and – with all due apologies – make the European attitudes so to say “less French and more British.” On the other hand, we have seen attempts to use the EU as leverage in order to apply pressure on CEE countries, as in the controversy over the International Criminal Court, attempts that failed and are unlikely to work because they are substantiated by no positive alternative to American leadership.

From a domestic political aspect, Bulgaria needs to have more flexible procedures for the transit and presence of Allied troops in the country, as well as to have available the option of posting professional soldiers to missions abroad without seeking prior consent that otherwise entails last-minute restructuring of units. These changes would require some review and suitable upgrading of legislation, including possibly the Bulgarian Constitution itself. It is also necessary to set up mechanisms for funding missions abroad, as their costs are now not planned and come in excess of already fixed budgets.

NATO Response Force

The decision to create a NATO Response Force (NRF) is a great step forward indeed. Yet even if it were operational today, a 20,000-strong force would have been nowhere near enough for an operation in Iraq for instance. Therefore it is just the first step, in which it would be appropriate for Bulgaria to participate with a battalion-sized self-contained contingent comprising combat infantry or special force units plus logistics, intelligence, etc.



Enhanced Capabilities

Under the Prague Capabilities Commitment, certain European Allies have reportedly assumed obligations to enhance specific military capabilities. Bulgaria ought to look for its adequate place in this development too. The Bulgarian armed forces, presently numbering over 50,000, are being downsized to reach eventually 45,000. Of them 60 percent would be available for regional action in the case

of conflict, while a 5,000-strong pool of capabilities would probably be designated for NATO out-of-region missions, including combat land force units and chemical, engineering and medical assets, as well as air force and naval components.

In another new development, the European Allies agreed in Prague that the Alliance should go ahead in the field of missile defense, supporting the decision to initiate a NATO Missile Defense feasibility study. Here Bulgaria could offer excellent radar sites, for example in the Rhodopes Mountains, for hosting an early-warning component that monitors the southeast approaches to Alliance air space.

Spending More

Certain European Allies agreed at the Prague Summit to increase their presently low defense spending. For its part, Bulgaria already spends enough: three percent of GDP. The challenge before us is rather to maintain the present level of financial commitments in the foreseeable future, and to get greater value for money by more cost-efficient military spending. Besides, a possible cascading of existent NATO equipment, such as radar, communication and information equipment, and seaport and airport equipment, would speed up NATO's absorption of the new space added to the Alliance by the Prague Summit.

Going Multinational

Finally, the new capabilities that are needed to contain the present security risks and challenges require a multinational approach, if nothing else because such capabilities are highly expensive. New levels of interoperability, training and education are also needed. Arguably, Bulgaria has acquired some valuable expertise on its way to NATO during the last decade, expertise that might be shared with Ukraine, Russia, and countries from the Caucasus, Central Asia and the southern Mediterranean. Bulgaria could also serve as a channel for the transfer of know-how from the Alliance to those countries, for instance by establishing a Balkan Defense College following the example of the existing Baltic Defense College. Such a college may even use the facilities in Plovdiv now housing the SEEBRIG Headquarters, after the latter is rotated to Romania in 2003.

If NATO is to be explained in one single word, then that word is “solidarity” – solidarity based on common values. This means that we are together both in good times and in times of hardship, that together the Allies could overcome any challenges faced in our joint contribution to world stability and security.

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