The NATO Summit in Prague: A German Point of View

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In the end the NATO Summit in Prague brought no surprises. This is a good thing: at the Summit the agreed road to develop the Alliance further was reaffirmed. Just like before, the main challenge is to adapt the Alliance to the world’s changed political circumstances. Those who still see this as the search of a desperate organization for a new enemy, because as a military defense community it has become obsolete at the end of the Cold War, misunderstand both the nature of the Alliance and its importance for transatlantic political relations. NATO is, and will continue to be, more than a purely military defense organization. Beside its tasks in the security field, it has a very positive and literally unique effect on transatlantic relations. This is good fortune for both Germany and the United States in these turbulent times.

The Political Dimension

The development of NATO is a dynamic ongoing process, both internally and externally. In Prague a beginning was made for the next stages in NATO’s renewal process. It was decided to invite seven countries for accession talks and to develop military capabilities further in order to face the changed security risks. The new NATO candidates have carried through important reforms in the last couple of years and have made considerable progress (they should, however, not slacken in their efforts). The reforms have not only encompassed the necessary restructuring of the military, but also questions such as the peaceful solution of internal and external conflicts, strengthening human rights and democratic control of the armed forces. Many specialists have already declared that the new candidates are in one way better prepared for accession than the three candidates from the first round of enlargement. Germany has played a valued role by sending civil and military advisers to the candidates, granting material help, and giving support in the field of education (both in German institutes and in the countries themselves).

The results of the Prague Summit correspond with Germany’s interests. Germany’s position has changed from the edge of the European zone of stability to a place that is more in the geographical center of this zone. Of course, a geographic enlargement of the Alliance also means an enlargement of the transatlantic community of values.

Enlargement means new neighbors and new latitude for shaping security policy in a broad sense. For example, besides the crucial relations with Russia, the partner countries in Central Asia are increasingly becoming an important link between Europe and Asia. The long-term cooperation with regard to solving the conflict in Afghanistan is proof of this. The same will apply, in an even stronger way, for the future of the Balkans and the Near East. How favorable the opportunities are with regard to shaping security policy, can best be measured from the stance of Russia vis-à-vis the invitations for NATO membership to former Soviet republics. The fact that accession of these countries has ceased to be a major problem for Russia is chiefly the result of NATO’s positive cooperation with Russia. A couple of years ago the reactions would have been quite different.

The realization that not all is well yet is proved by the current problems with partners in Ukraine. They are accused of arms exports to crisis areas and illegal technology transfers to Iraq. If this proves to be true, NATO will have to respond appropriately. A departure from agreed rules is not acceptable. These agreements also encompass things like arms control and confidence-building measures. Further integration of Ukraine in the Euro-Atlantic structures, as was discussed in the margins of the Prague Summit, is an appropriate way to cultivate this confidence.
The Military Dimension

The further development of NATO and the answers that have to be found to the new challenges are also determined by military adaptations. The youngest developments generally show that territorial defense and the defense against new threats do not bite each other. According to the broad definition of the concept of security, territorial defense starts as soon as one is confronted with international crises and conflicts. The threat of international terrorism should increasingly be seen as part of a willingness to settle regional conflicts on an international level through the use of force. Terrorist attacks are nothing more than trying to wage war with different means, without reckoning with ethical and moral basic rights such as the Geneva Conventions.

To answer these problems NATO has launched the Prague Capabilities Commitments, which give clear priority to enlarging military capacities. These include inter alia defense against attacks with weapons of mass destruction, making available modern communication technology, strategic airlift capacities or enhanced intelligence techniques. With the request to establish a NATO Response Force (NRF) the operational capacity has clearly been given form. Germany has already announced that – if necessary – it will make troops available from all three military branches. The continued financial support for this contribution is important homework for the German government, keeping in mind the overall budget of the Ministry of Defense.

For Germany the political dimensions of possible deployment of a future NRF is especially important. Decisions on this must be taken by the NATO Council. It should be kept in mind that, according to the current laws, the German parliament has to agree with such a deployment of troops. If the NRF has to be deployable within a week, as the United States wants, the German government and parliament need to act quickly. There is already discussion about extending the government’s possibilities for decision-making, but nothing has yet been decided.

The question is now whether the planned NRF is compatible with the reaction force that is being built within the framework of the European Security and Defense Policy, or whether it is a rival. This question is justified because overlaps have to be precluded. One thing, however, has to be clear: within the foreseeable future Europe will not be able to solve international security questions by itself. The same applies for the United States, as is shown by the efforts of the Bush administration to form coalitions in the fight against terrorism. The efforts to increase the defense capacity of the European Union and its partners are always at the same time a contribution to the increase of transatlantic military readiness. The political mistake that is at the base of the discussion is the skepticism with regard to the United States’ possible infinite power. It is ridiculous to assume political parity in questions of international security and the accompanying investments in the defense sphere. Only those that are prepared to catch up with the enormous technological lead of the United States and those that are prepared to free the necessary means to build modern armed forces can claim to take joint decisions on an equal footing. For this it is of course also necessary that the Americans are willing to give equal access to the defense materiel market and corresponding technology. This is where NATO’s future in reality depends.

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