Is NATO Serious? An American Perspective on Prague

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NATO’s decision to invite seven new members, accompanied by Russia’s decision to cooperate with an enlarged NATO, closes the book on the twentieth century’s division of Europe. By history’s standards, this is quite a feat. Yet, if NATO had accomplished no more than this at Prague, its future would have little strategic significance — a regional collective security organization for a region whose need for collective security is, thankfully, steadily declining. It is evident now that the relentless tide of political and economic freedom has all but washed away the potential for European war, with the possible exception of small flare-ups in a particular corner of the Balkans.

An Atlantic Alliance used only to monitor peace in twenty-first-century Europe would fall far short both of the needs of the North American and European democracies (old and young) and of what they are capable of achieving together, given their enormous combined capacities. Such a NATO would also drop off America’s global agenda, as Europeans feared was already happening before Washington’s energetic run-up to Prague. What the United States and Europe need – each as much as the other – is an Alliance that can thwart the growing dangers to their interests and to world security beyond Europe.

Impelled by the 9/11 attack on the United States, the Prague sumiteers acknowledged the need to meet the most acute of such dangers: terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the horrifying combination of the two. Prague succeeded because the Europeans admitted that these dangers are relevant to their security and the Americans recognized that their alliance with Europe is relevant to these dangers. In particular, there appears to be a solid US-European commitment to eliminate the cancer of al-Qaeda, wherever it may metastasize. Steady progress is being made on both sides of the Atlantic in preventing and preparing for large-scale terrorist acts. Now NATO intends to get in on the act by developing military capabilities to do virtually anywhere what US forces did largely on their own against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Prague also revealed a consensus – admittedly a shaky one – that Iraq must be stripped of its weapons of mass destruction, even if military intervention is required to do so. While agreement on what exactly should trigger a US-led attack on Iraq may yet prove elusive, the United States and most European Allies have made remarkable strides toward a unified position, considering how far apart they were just a few months ago.

By tackling these current threats, NATO has made plain that it will be neither just a pan-European security consultation forum nor an insurance policy against a renewed (implausible) hegemonic threat to Europe. Prague has given NATO a new gust of wind. Its declared strategic purpose for the coming years is clear and compelling: protection of the Alliance, its interests, and world security from weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists and outlaw regimes, starting with al-Qaeda and Iraq.

But this agenda could prove to be transitory. After all, that is precisely the objective. That NATO should move from one strategic priority to another is natural and essential. Its original strategic task – to deter Soviet aggression – proved transitory when communism collapsed. Once that happened, NATO adopted a new mission: closing the Cold War’s wounds – the political divisions and ethnic antagonisms that threatened post-communist Europe. That 1990s’ mission, too, has been largely accomplished by the Alliance, although not without having to use force in Bosnia and Kosovo. So Prague marks the passage from NATO’s immediate post-Cold War focus – the second in its lifetime – to another focus.
Refocusing NATO is necessary but not sufficient. The chief question left unanswered by Prague is whether the United States and the European Allies are committed fundamentally to transforming NATO so that it can respond to *whatever* perils the uncertain future holds – not only terrorism and weapons of mass destruction but, for example, a threat to world energy supplies, uncontrollable violence in the Middle East, genocide in Africa, the collapse of some key states, hegemonic aggression in critical parts of Asia, and other imaginable security dangers. On this question, the message from Prague is comforting but inconclusive.

Prague suggests that the United States and Europe, despite their sharp disagreements and despite changing global conditions, gravitate together to seek security for themselves and to take responsibility for international security. Missions change, but the fundamental values and interests that cause this transatlantic attraction do not; and unfortunately neither has NATO machinery changed enough to keep pace with this fluid world. The most profound challenge facing NATO today is not enlargement or al-Qaeda or Iraq. It is the reengineering of NATO itself.

In this light, the most significant development at Prague was that NATO has at last recognized, without the slightest fuss, that it must be able to respond to dangers *anywhere*. The refusal of the European Allies to accept this need when it was presented by the previous US administration five years ago at the Washington Summit kept NATO from transforming to cope with global insecurity, leaving it largely useless following September 11, 2001 when neither its forces nor its command structure nor its decision-making were able to meet a sudden, distant, unfamiliar threat.

Europe’s belated acceptance that insecurity is global removes a major roadblock to NATO transformation. However, the Prague communiqué alone does not alter the raw truth that NATO is badly lacking in both the capabilities and the dexterity to confront future threats that the Atlantic democracies may face, whatever and wherever they are. In particular, NATO does not have: a) expeditionary military forces capable of operating in coalition across the full spectrum of contingencies; b) a command and control structure with the flexibility and reach to employ such force; and c) the ability to decide, act and react swiftly. There is little mystery about why the United States did not turn to NATO to defeat the Taliban and is unlikely to turn to NATO to disarm Saddam Hussein: NATO’s existing forces and machinery are simply too clumsy.

The agreement at Prague to build a NATO Response Force (NRF) is more important than the smallness of the force suggests. Creating such a capability, contributing forces to it, and whipping it into fighting shape imply an acceptance by the European Allies of the need for expeditionary combat capabilities to operate at the most demanding and, bluntly speaking, most violent end of the contingency spectrum. It also suggests that the Europeans are now at least as determined to be able to fight alongside the United States as they are to be able to conduct military operations in its absence, which has been the motivation of the EU’s European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Finally, the new force can be the vehicle to enable European militaries to be modernized in parallel with the modernization of the US military, thus helping to close the gap in US and European capabilities. For all these reasons, the NATO Response Force is the real jewel in the crown of the Prague Summit.

Redesigning NATO’s command structure will be as difficult and important as fielding an Alliance expeditionary force. NATO’s transformation could fail if the command structure does not undergo a complete metamorphosis, from a geographically static structure to a dynamic one that can be employed anywhere. One hopes that NATO’s military and political leaders will have the ingenuity and nerve to fix this. Marginal modifications to a structure designed to defeat aggression against western Europe will obviously be inadequate.
Finally, Alliance decision-making will have to be streamlined. NATO’s stewards say that the consensus rule of the North Atlantic Council will not be relaxed, lest Alliance solidarity be destroyed. Fair enough. But then another way must be found to ensure that those who are not willing to accept security responsibilities will step out of the way of those who are. A test case may be Germany’s stated opposition to military action to disarm Iraq. If the consensus rule prevents NATO from supporting military action by the United States and other Allies, the flush of success from Prague will vanish, and the Americans may decide after all that NATO presents more of an obstacle than an asset in confronting the real dangers of the new era. Frankly, if NATO’s decision-making system is not modernized, the United States will choose a path of leading small _ad hoc_ coalitions of like-minded friends or, worse, the very unilateralism that Europeans dread. The stakes are too high to let NATO’s traditions impede the attempt to make it agile.

At Prague, the United States answered the criticism that it had lost interest in NATO by proposing a sweeping, and overdue, transformation. The Allies did their part by signing on to some major commitments. If the Europeans now turn their backs on these commitments, or if the United States impatiently gives up on its Allies, Prague may turn out to be NATO’s last serious summit.

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