Hungary and the Prague Summit

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Immediately before the Prague Summit an article was published by Celeste A. Wallander entitled “NATO’s Price: Shape Up or Ship Out” in the November/December 2002 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. In general, the author voices her doubts regarding the next round of expansion and, in particular, she singles out Hungary as the bad example. Relying on one unnamed source, Wallander claims that NATO would have already expelled Hungary from the Alliance if there were provisions for doing so. In fact, she suggests that such provisions be built into the Washington Treaty so that member countries are forced to meet the political, military, civil rights, human rights, etc., standards of the Alliance. Although the views expressed in the article (and in another written in a similar tone in *The Washington Post*) cannot be interpreted as the official views of the Bush administration, these statements and some others made both officially and unofficially clearly mark that – at least the US leadership – is far from satisfied with the performance of Hungary in the Alliance.

Also just before the Prague Summit, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Péter Medgyessy, met with US President George Bush, Vice-President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Attorney General John Ashcroft in Washington. The bilateral talks revolved mostly around security issues and the statements and promises made by the Hungarian politicians in the American capital were directly related to Hungary’s membership in NATO. It therefore seems logical not to separate them from the statements and promises announced in Prague.

The *Foreign Affairs* article, which criticizes the Hungarian government between 1998-2002 for condoning anti-Semitism in the country, for trying to speak for Hungarian minorities living in neighboring countries, and for lagging behind the military commitments made during the pre-accession period, is wide off the target regarding the political issues. Celeste Wallander does not go into specifics, does not use any references and, in general, seems to be un- and misinformed about the questions she addresses in this regard. However, her comments on Hungary’s poor military capabilities are more valid. One point should be emphasized here, however. It is true that the Hungarian military is not in a shape that the leaders of the Alliance, especially the Americans, would like to see, but the Hungarian military has had to be downsized (from some 160,000 troops to some 35,000), restructured, and modernized at a time of painful economic and political restructuring in the past dozen years or so. Therefore, although some of the criticisms are absolutely justified, one should be careful about making blanket statements because a number of the Alliance’s members, which have not had to cope with problems related to the legacy of half a century-long communism and the troublesome transition from a bankrupt political, economic, and social system toward a parliamentary democracy and functioning market economy, have not lived up to expectations in the military field either.

Both American and NATO officials have expressed their disappointment concerning the Hungarian defense budget level. Hungary spent more than three percent of its GDP on defense in the Warsaw Pact. After the dissolution of this military alliance, Hungary made use of the “peace dividend” and by the 1990s it had cut its defense budget to some 1.35 percent of the shrinking GDP. During the NATO accession talks, Hungary promised to increase its defense spending to 1.81 percent of its GDP by 2002, which still puts the country somewhere at the bottom of the defense outlays in terms of GDP among the NATO members. Of course, it is very difficult to assess with absolute certainty the amounts of money spent on defense and, moreover, the debate is about the 1.81 percent of what: in Hungary quite a substantial proportion of the GDP is produced by multinational corporations which repatriate much of their profits; there is therefore quite a wide gap between GDP and GNP. Hungary has
promised to increase its defense budget to two percent of GDP by 2004 and the budget of the Defense Ministry is planned to be increased from 289 billion forints to 314.5 billion in 2003 (340 billion forints amounts to approximately two percent of GDP).

Although Hungarian participation in NATO-led missions started well before Hungary’s accession to NATO (IFOR and SFOR), it took the form of sending non-combatant, mainly engineer battalions. Hungary’s importance increased because of the country’s geopolitical position during the Kosovo crisis (host nation support, logistical center at Taszár, overflight rights, etc.). However, this relative advantage is likely to diminish in the future. The two Balkan countries, Romania and Bulgaria, have much more to offer regarding airfields, ports, and access to such trouble spots as the Balkans and the Middle East. Nevertheless, the US base at Taszár in southwest Hungary is likely to be used in the future as well; at present, the training of public servants and interpreters is planned in the facility. At the same time, the Bush administration resented the fact that Hungary did not offer any military assistance after September 11 2001. The Hungarian government at that time did offer to send a medical team to Afghanistan, but the offer was rejected by the US. Now, the Hungarian delegation made a promise in Washington of sending a unit of some 40 troops to Afghanistan under German command in 2003 (it is a telling fact about the transport capabilities of the European Allies that the Bundeswehr is able to lift the Hungarian troops on board leased Ukrainian transport aircraft).

NATO member countries should have improved their capabilities in accordance with NATO’s Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI). However, practically none of the member states has met the requirements, and Hungary was no exception. According to some estimates, Hungary has fulfilled only some 30 percent of its commitments made in 1999. The Hungarian government has recently handed over a list of new commitments to be fulfilled by 2005, including equipping the Hungarian troops with adequate protective gear against biological and chemical weapons, setting up a battalion for the new NATO rapid reaction force (3,000 troops at an estimated cost of 30 billion forints), providing logistical support for another battalion, increasing airlifting capacities, and developing the fleet of MI-24 attack and transport helicopters. With regard to the strategic airlift capacities, the Hungarian Defense Minister has floated the idea of purchasing or leasing two AN-70 Ukrainian-made transport planes. Another option is to acquire C-130 transport planes; this solution has not been excluded from the range of options either. Either of the options can be realized in 2005 or 2006 at the earliest.

Another question relates to Hungary’s potential participation in ballistic missile defense. When the Bush administration in early 2001 indicated its determination to go ahead with some version of the US National Missile Defense (NMD), Hungary was one of the few European Allies that endorsed the idea. At the latest bilateral discussions in Washington, the Hungarian Foreign Minister thought it possible for Hungary to provide assistance in establishing an early-warning system. The Hungarian contribution is likely to be restricted to offering sites for radar stations and the like.

The Prague Summit identified four major goals for NATO members: information superiority; defense against weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the so-called dirty bombs; interoperability and quick deployment of troops. With regard to the Hungarian commitments made in Washington and Prague, Hungary’s current efforts fit well into the overall goals of the Alliance. Of course, the Devil is in the details and the implementation. It seems clear that Hungary cannot promise more now than it can deliver. That is, defense budgets should be increased in real value. Nevertheless, that is not enough in itself. The restructuring of the Hungarian military should be stepped up: the Hungarian military is still “top heavy.” There are relatively too many officers, the number of military personnel employed in the Hungarian Ministry of Defense and the general staff is still too high. The Ministry of Defense’s military budget should be more rational. As regards the political conditions, the situation is more
favorable for the fulfillment of Hungarian commitments. Partly because of problems regarding the transition from communism, defense was somewhat neglected by the various coalition governments in the 1990s. It also meant that successive Defense Ministers did not possess the necessary political clout to fight successfully for higher budgets and to fight entrenched interests within the military. However, the current Defense Minister is the Vice-President of the ruling Socialist Party, with strong political ambitions, and he is sure to do his best to make defense a success story.

In a broader sense, Hungary is one of the countries whose security – at least regarding traditional security challenges – will be enhanced with the expansion of NATO. Three Hungarian neighbors – two with large Hungarian minorities (Romania and Slovakia) – will become new members, thus the mostly psychological “island” syndrome will disappear (i.e. Hungary is the only NATO member that does not currently share a common border with any other member state). However, Hungary should not believe that in this situation defense is not of primary concern. On one hand, the strength of the Alliance depends on the willingness and capabilities of each of the members, and even the “small” countries can make important contributions to common defense if they use their relatively sparse resources with appropriate care and circumspection. On the other hand, a member of NATO may become a target of asymmetrical attacks and challenges (see the fate of countries such as Kenya) and Hungary should develop at least a minimum of capabilities with which it can successfully handle these challenges on its own in the future.

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