Does NATO have a Future after Prague?

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For a long period of time, NATO was a "situation." Now it has become a process, just like the EU has been from the very beginning. In the European framework, the notion of permanent movement and of steady political and institutional development has always been considered a *sine qua non* condition for success. Whatever the future of the EU (and I do support the idea of a European Federation), those in charge and public opinion should bear in mind the notion that in defense and security matters there is a wider institutional framework, which has working bodies, strategic and military planning structures and political assets.

Still, NATO's future has been at stake for some time now. First, the disappearance of the traditional enemy caused a strong discussion about the actual need for NATO. Second, out-of-area conflicts made the organization act in a non-traditional way, and this caused large-spread arguments about its legitimacy. Third, new – and allegedly unforeseeable – threats called for new approaches, far from traditional procedures and capabilities. Fourth, an enlargement process, not entirely uncontroversial, called for huge diplomatic efforts, largely dispersing the available political energy. Fifth, the generous European invocation of Article 5 after 9/11 received a quite discouraging, although understandable, response from the United States. Sixth, the building process of ESDP/ESDI, which has been quite unsuccessful until now, is the cause of a certain amount of mistrust on the other side of the Atlantic, poorly spoken but richly felt. Finally, the gap between American and European military capabilities, which has existed for many years without major controversy, is now topping the transatlantic agenda.

Not surprisingly, the Prague Summit became a kind of political panacea. Enlargement – until a year ago the main purpose of the gathering – ceased to be the issue. Political decisions on this issue were taken months before the Summit, almost regardless of the developments in the Membership Action Plan. Defense and security concepts and borders, strategic formulations, legal weaponry, definition of forces and chains of command, balance and interoperability of military capabilities, a plethora of questions calling for decisions, in an environment in which one is more pushed by events than informed by philosophic concepts, theoretical formulations, or political standing points.

In this sense, Prague was doomed to be unsuccessful. Each of the questions that it was supposed to answer has hundreds of sub-questions. It was impossible to discuss them all, or even to establish comprehensive guidelines for the future. Whatever the outcome, the accusation of uselessness would always be made. If Prague had ended with a general political declaration, NATO would have been accused of not having solved any real and concrete problems. If it had gone into many details, NATO would have been blamed as a technical process, not as a producer of consensual guidelines for the future.

On the other hand, the Prague Summit was – and will be accused of being for a long time – one more gathering of "the powerful against the weak," of "the neo-liberalism of the rich against the needs of the poor," of "war-makers against peace lovers," of "masters of globalization against the interests of the world social economy." That is one of the reasons why we in the Atlantic Treaty Association (ATA) took the initiative of organizing a student summit in Prague. One must, just as during the Cold War, have the courage to be in the front line of the defense of one's own freedom, and to believe that in defending it, one is projecting a message of liberty, justice and progress. Either we give strength and knowledge to the successor generation about this, or we will be the victims of our unawareness in a short period of time. The ATA was able, with the cooperation of several partners and especially the
Atlantic Council of the United States, to organize a gathering of about 200 students from 38 countries parallel to the Prague Summit.

Was the Prague Summit a success? Yes and no. On the one hand, a number of decisions – the expected ones – received the NATO leaders’ solemn seal of approval: enlargement was approved, as well as the new NATO Rapid Reaction Force, the new command structures, the new approach to sharing responsibilities and burdens. This is a positive development. But the decision on enlargement was only a formal intention, not a reality: the Membership Action Plan procedures and preparations will continue, and everybody knows that, for various reasons, not one single invited candidate fulfils its demands at this moment. The Rapid Reaction Force is also but a formal intention, taken on not so firm grounds. The new command structure was not the object of a final, concrete agreement. Specific contributions and actual burdens were left for later. A declaration about Iraq was produced, just stating, even if between the lines, that on this matter basic disagreements still exist.

From a European point of view, one has to confess that what one could call the Transatlantic Security and Defense Community suffers from lack of definition from the European side. It is not enough, or even fair, to accuse the United States of being unilateralist when we, from our side, are not able to agree on political structures, let alone on policies capable of providing a common European position within the Euro-Atlantic framework. If one realizes that there is no formal permanent dialogue council between the EU and NATO, one can easily understand why it has become so difficult to establish the main lines of a common policy. NATO does formally talk with the OSCE, with Russia, with Ukraine, with the PfP countries, but not with the EU! The EU is not even able to be univocal about its own internal agreements, as is blatantly clear in the St Malo agreement case. The EU appointed Mr CFSP (Javier Solana), but nobody knows about his exact functions, hierarchic position or actual powers. The list of European failures in this respect is vast, fastidious and disappointing.

In this unreassuringly strange framework, the sole positive fact is that NATO continues to be the unique structure that, in spite of itself, does have the ability to work in a steady and permanent manner on the attainment of some consensual decisions capable of shaping a future of stability and peace. In this sense, one can be glad about the outcome of Prague. But the truth is that if some new tracks were opened or formalized in Prague, their success depends much more on the steps ahead that on the decisions themselves. As always, optimism will not be the best of the advisers.

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