NATO Enlargement post-1989: Successful Adaptation or Decline?

ANDREW A. MICHTA

Abstract

NATO enlargement after the cold war contributed to the democratic transformation of post-communist states. It failed, however, to generate a larger consensus on the shared mission and to provide the requisite military capabilities. Today, notwithstanding the rhetoric of unity after the 2008 Bucharest summit, NATO struggles to reconcile the out-of-area experience of the Balkan wars with its post-9/11 tasks and the renewed territorial defense concerns raised by the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Paradoxically, the more NATO has expanded to foster the military–political security of the new democratic states of eastern and south-eastern Europe, the less it seems capable of dealing with real security threats such as Afghanistan. Facing the possible strategic failure of its ISAF mission, NATO needs to re-evaluate the policy track chosen post-1989.

The revolutions of 1989 unmade geostrategic assumptions that had been etched in cold war concrete. Neither Washington nor its NATO allies had anticipated the scenario of that year and were caught off guard by the power shifts on the Continent. Across the Warsaw Pact's so-called Northern Tier and in the Balkans, the 1989 revolutions unhinged established security structures, in the process raising the spectre of instability in the critical belt between the Baltic Sea in the north and the Black Sea and the Adriatic on NATO's southern flank. While Europe and the United States' political and intellectual elites celebrated what Joseph Rothschild called the Continent's 'return to diversity', the future of European security – and therefore also transatlantic security – was unclear. Four years later and Russia's objections notwithstanding, NATO enlargement was set to become the principal vehicle for Euro-Atlantic security policy in the region. By 1995 post-communist democracies were on track to apply for NATO membership.

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Gernackerstrasse 2, 82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany; michtaa@marshallcenter.org. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

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Today, NATO enlargement may be seen to have been an obvious pathway to security and democracy in post-communist countries and as a means of stabilising the 'grey zone of Europe'. While scholars and analysts continue to debate the actual scope and phases of the process, few seem to question its overall political utility, emphasising the norm-setting aspect of the two cycles of NATO enlargement and their contribution to the democratic transformation of post-communist space. However, while the institutional and normative aspects of what has transpired since 1989 may give some profound satisfaction, today, with NATO polarised by debates on current and future missions, the geopolitical dimension of NATO enlargement into post-communist Europe requires careful reassessment as a backdrop to the Eurasian security environment.

In order to assess the legacy of NATO enlargement, it is important to revisit the larger geostrategic context of the decision to enlarge NATO and the implications of the choices made at that time, especially those made shortly after the collapse of communism. For that purpose, I shall focus on two key issues: the re-emergence of regional security dilemmas in post-1989 Europe and the adaptation of the NATO alliance to the post-enlargement strategic realities. In order to bring the discussion to the present, I shall then touch on the impact of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war on the enlargement debate, and highlight the critical importance of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan for the future of transatlantic security.

The security dilemmas of 1989 and the enlargement decision

In 1989, notwithstanding the joy surrounding the east European revolutions and the attendant fall of the Berlin Wall, there was palpable concern in Washington and in European capitals that, in terms of security, post-communist Europe was about to become the Continent's 'grey zone' or a 'new *Zwischeneuropa*'. Similar concern was also evident in eastern Europe, where newly elected governments revisited traditional geopolitics and balance-of-power issues, at times venturing into rather odd schemes, such as Polish president Lech Walesa's ideas about an east-central European 'NATO-bis', or the Russian suggestion that the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE – the predecessor of the Organization of Security and Co-Operation in Europe, OSCE) be transformed into a new pan-European security framework to replace the two cold war alliances. Many in eastern Europe feared that the future might hold the same security dilemmas as those of the past. For Poland in particular, the threat of central Europe becoming a 'grey zone' was the most keenly felt challenge to its newly regained independence, as roughly one-third of the country's territory had belonged to Germany before the Second World War and was given as compensation for the loss of Polish territory in the east.

Finding a solution to the region's resurgent security dilemma that would negate the historically peripheral status of central Europe would become the critical challenge of the decade.[1] Although the Hungarians raised the question of expanding NATO as

[1] For a discussion of residual regional security issues see Joshua B. Spero, *Bridging the European Divide: Middle Power Politics and Regional Security Dilemmas* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

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early as 1990, the idea of bringing the former Soviet Warsaw Pact satellites into the North Atlantic Alliance seemed beyond the realms of possibility in the immediate post-1989 years.

In the direct aftermath of the revolutions of 1989 there was little to indicate that the preferred solution to the security dilemma of post-communist eastern Europe would be the enlargement and transformation of NATO. The idea of 'return to Europe' articulated in January 1990 by Vaclav Havel did not necessarily imply that the end of communism would mean the full integration of post-communist states with the West.[2] However, it was clear by 1991 that options other than NATO membership, such as the CSCE/OSCE or various regional security arrangements, had little credibility. NATO responded cautiously at first, in part because of the still fragile domestic conditions in the new democracies and also because of Moscow's strong opposition to enlargement.[3] At the July 1990 London summit NATO invited members of the Warsaw Pact – then still in existence – to send liaison ambassadors, but did not go further.

Two landmark events continue to define the security environment of Europe: the unification of Germany and the break-up of the Soviet Union. The way in which these events occurred was critical for east European security post-1989. Since Germany opted for unification within the context of the existing economic, political and security structures, NATO's continued viability remained of vital interest to the member states. At the same time, democracy was viewed in eastern Europe as synonymous with the restoration of national sovereignty. From the vantage point of these states, the challenge was how to dispose of the Warsaw Pact, including the residual institutions, personnel and military installations.

Historically the 'dual insecurity' of eastern Europe has been a function of the region's geopolitics and its limited capabilities. Confined to a seemingly perpetual peripheral status, the region has been unable to deal independently with external threats. This geostrategic vulnerability was compounded by a history of interrupted statehood. For most of the post-communist states, their national histories were partly disconnected from their state institutions. In extreme cases, such as Poland, the state disappeared altogether from the map of Europe for over a century.

The core security dilemma for the region could be summed up as the choice of being either 'in the middle' or 'on the periphery', with the middle position constituting only an intermediate transition stage to the fully peripheral boundary role.[4] In the case of central Europe, being located in the middle has not made the region central in the geostrategic sense. In the context of these two aspects of the

[2] On 25–26 January 1990, President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia called for Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to work together for a 'return to Europe'. The idea was viewed as an affirmation of pan-European identity, but not as a call to political action.

[3] Until the first round of enlargement in 1999, the Russians insisted that Mikhail Gorbachev be given a specific promise by US Secretary of State James A. Baker that, if Moscow agreed to the unification of Germany, NATO would not expand to the east – a claim Baker has vigorously disputed. For his views on what transpired during his negotiations with Gorbachev, see Michael R. Gordon, 'The Anatomy of Misunderstanding', *New York Times*, 25 March 1997.

[4] André Liebich, 'East Central Europe: The Unbearable Tightness of Being', in Kurt R. Spillmann and Andreas Wenger, eds., *Towards the 21st Century: Trends in Post-Cold War International Security Policy*,

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region's insecurity – geostrategic vulnerability and the historical discontinuity of state institutions – NATO enlargement was viewed as the preferred solution to the security dilemma, as it offered the region an opportunity to overcome both. By joining NATO the post-communist states could anchor themselves in the West and 'return to Europe'.

While the US position was critical to NATO policy post-1989, arguably no factor played a more important role in addressing the security dilemma of central Europe than decisions taken by Germany following unification. The Bonn/Berlin choice to remain anchored in the existing transatlantic institutions provided the essential closure to the Russian/German competition for the 'middle', augmented by Germany's decision to offer the region a pathway to subsequent European Union integration. In that context the German–Polish relationship held the promise of becoming the 'second grand European reconciliation', after the post-war Franco-German arrangements.

Seen from Washington, NATO enlargement into central Europe first seemed fundamentally political and hence reactive, while for the Europeans – especially the Germans – it was seen as adding strategic depth in the east. Subsequently, the enlargement process and the structures of the 'new NATO' were used to foster the democratisation agenda the allies had accepted through the principle of conditionality inherent in the Membership Action Plan (MAP). A decade after 1989, the first round closed the geostrategic equation in central Europe by uniting Germany and Poland around a larger shared goal of rebalancing the region. The 1999 round was primarily about Poland, as the Czech Republic and Hungary – while vindicated by Articles 2 and 10 of the Washington Treaty – did not carry the same geostrategic weight. Bringing Poland into NATO marked the first step towards overcoming the regional insecurity dilemma: it reaffirmed that the stability and security of Poland had become a vital national interest of the unified Federal Republic, while at the same time offering to Poland the transatlantic security framework critical to any future resolution of the two countries' tortuous historical legacies.

By the mid-1990s NATO membership for central Europe was viewed by a growing number within and outside the US administration as a necessary step beyond the 1994 Partnership for Peace formula.[5] The January 1994 summit of NATO heads of state was critical to opening the door, and the envisioned transformation of regional security proceeded through several stages, adjusting to the 'pacted' nature of political change in the region.[6] For its proponents, NATO enlargement provided the framework for coping with the 1989 revolutionary shift in European geopolitics. Their argument was strengthened by the de facto enlargement of the alliance in October 1990, when

Studies in Contemporary History and Security Policy 4 (1) (Bern: Peter Lang, and Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 1999).

[5] James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The US Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 45.

[6] Jeffrey Simon, *Poland and NATO: A Study in Civil–Military Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

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the unified German state extended the collective defence provisions of Article 5 to the new *Länder*.

NATO enlargement and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact ran in parallel. As pressure to join NATO increased in eastern and central Europe, Soviet forces began the process of withdrawing from the region, leaving Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1991, and Poland in 1993. In February 1991 the foreign and defence ministers of the Warsaw Pact countries met in Budapest to announce the dissolution of the military structures of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, thereby effectively ending it; the organisation was formally dissolved on 1 July 1991. A few months later the Rome NATO summit created the North Atlantic Co-operation Council (NACC) as a framework for dialogue between the alliance and the east and central Europeans. By mid-1992, when the Soviet Union itself had disintegrated and Yugoslavia exploded into war, the NACC had increased from six to twenty-three members.

The next steps proceeded with rapid logic.[7] The September 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement inaugurated discussion of the modalities of enlargement, as well as the extent to which conditionality and external norm-setting principles would from then on drive the process. By 1997 the alliance was ready to introduce both the political and military interoperability criteria, which were articulated at the Madrid summit later that year. Yet the process had become a political exercise par excellence, to the neglect of the military dimension of security.

Truly decisive for the alliance were the years 1997–9, when the idea of NATO enlargement evolved from principle to strategy, and concerns about Moscow's opposition to enlargement were largely set aside. At the 1999 Washington summit, NATO embarked on the path to further enlargement, naming partners and setting target dates. As the 1999 round of enlargement coincided with the decision to go to war against Serbia, it sowed the seeds of discord over the allied mission that have stayed with NATO to this day, especially about how far 'out-of-area' NATO would be prepared to deploy. As Frederic Bozo observed, the 'break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991 was, in itself, a defining moment for NATO's post-Cold War fate'.[8] It still is.

NATO post-1989 enlargement was about hedging against uncertainty bringing strategic depth to the alliance, especially to the Federal Republic of Germany. The revolutions of 1989 briefly reopened the issue of borders, especially for Poland and Germany, and to an extent for Germany and Czechoslovakia and for Romania and Hungary. All were quickly eclipsed by the overriding goal of NATO membership.

What set the first round of enlargement apart from the second and the third rounds was that NATO was still grappling with the geostrategic consequences of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. The central issue was traditional security plus a framework that could sustain the 'second grand reconciliation' in Europe. But

[7] One last effort to delay the final decision was embodied in the Partnership for Peace formula, formally initiated by the January 1994 Brussels NATO summit, with its declaration of commitment to future enlargement.

[8] Frederic Bozo, 'Continuity or Change? The View from Europe', in S. Victor Papacosma, Sean Kay and Mark R. Rubin, eds., *NATO after Fifty Years* (Willmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 2001), 63.

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even among the most ardent NATO supporters there were differences of opinion about the final outcome. The idea of enlarging the alliance to include several former Warsaw Pact Soviet satellites began to dominate in the debates, in connection with redefining the areas of allied operation. Linking these two created the necessary force to drive the process forward. It was a crossing of the Rubicon for NATO, because in the future defence against a specific adversary, for example Russia, would no longer be the central principle for the alliance.

Among the proponents of NATO's traditional defensive role support for pushing its boundaries eastward was rationalised in terms of creating the strategic depth that NATO had desperately lacked during the cold war. From this position realists such as Henry Kissinger ultimately supported enlargement as a necessary response to the altered situation, and possibly as a remedy for the residual deficiencies of the Cold War era strategy. The inclusion of Poland in the alliance expanded the perimeter to the Bug River, adding a depth of over 300 miles to the east. This traditional geostrategic thinking fell out of favour as Yeltsin's Russia sank into its post-imperial morass and ceased to be an immediate threat. After all, it would be difficult to argue that Article 5 contingency against Russia was still critical if, according to most estimates, Russia was unlikely to re-emerge as a threat for at least another decade. In contrast, concern over the threat from Russia is today quickly returning to focus, especially among the 'new allies'.

US advocates of preserving NATO after 1989 argued for limited out-of-area operations, with an emphasis on Europe's periphery, rather than traditional territorial collective defence. The Balkan geostrategic dimension would become the predominant driving concern following the eruption of the ten-day Slovenian war in 1991, and provided the rationale for the out-of-area approach. The revolutions of 1989 marked the beginning of NATO's search for a mission around which its members could coalesce; the Balkan wars seemed to provide the answer, validating Senator Richard Lugar's assertion that the stark dilemma for the alliance was 'out-of-area or out of business'. However, for the new allies NATO's evolution into 'expeditionary alliance' preferred by the United States became the most worrisome trend, because it took the alliance away from its traditional defensive mission. The out-of-area NATO was not the alliance they wanted to join.

Still, NATO's war with Serbia over ethnic violence against Kosovo Albanians did not settle the question of the organisation's mission. For the Americans, Kosovo was to be the precedent-setting war, yet for most of the European allies it marked the limits of intervention. Most importantly, the lessons of the 'war by committee' in Kosovo contributed to the perception on the US side that the alliance was quickly shedding its military utility. Throughout the 1990s the Europeans maintained that NATO's attention ought to be focused on Europe, or as close as possible to Europe's periphery. The Americans had a different vision: an 'expeditionary alliance' able to deliver security wherever it was needed.

By emphasising the political dimension of enlargement and de-emphasising persistent capability shortfalls and interoperability problems, Washington sent the first signal that the centre of gravity in the alliance had shifted from the military to the

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political. Although there was concern in the aftermath of the 1999 enlargement over the devolution of NATO and its transformation into a collective security organisation, the Clinton administration seemed unable to come to terms with the long-term consequences for the alliance of the lack of suitable military capabilities to address post-Cold War security challenges. The growth of commitments continued without commensurate growth in NATO capabilities. NATO operations in the Balkans further underscored the paucity of European military power when compared with US contributions, thereby reaffirming the view that NATO has become a collective security organisation.

In 2001, US policy on enlargement passed another key landmark. In his speech on June 15 of that year at Warsaw University, President George W. Bush outlined his broad vision of a new security community. As he put it, 'all of Europe's new democracies, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all that lie between, should have the same chance for security and freedom – and the same chance to join the institutions of Europe – as Europe's old democracies have'. Pledging 'no more Munichs' and 'no more Yaltas', President Bush spoke of his belief in 'NATO membership for all of Europe's democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibilities that NATO brings'.[9] Again, notwithstanding the subsequent assertions, the issue of developing usable deployable capabilities was not the first priority. A few months later, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the United States – 9/11– Washington and Brussels would discover the consequences of this myopic policy.

Adaptation to the consequences of enlargement

The larger question about the long-term consequences of NATO enlargement into eastern Europe must weigh the regional security dimension against the impact of the enlargement policy on the alliance itself. The choice of the former Warsaw Pact states, informed by the experience of decades of Soviet domination and the residual fear of Russia, was to embrace NATO as a solution to their security dilemmas post-1989. Their support for the United States' vision of the expeditionary alliance has barely concealed the fact that the alliance the 1989–90 cohort sought was the 'old NATO' – a traditionally defined Article 5 collective defence organisation. The real fissures in NATO did not surface until after 2001, making the 1990s a period during which the Balkan out-of-area operations were interpreted by the participants as best suited to their interests. The United States saw the Kosovo campaign as a precedent-setting development, disclosing a range of political and military problems within the alliance that had been unaddressed by the enlargement process. For the 'old' European allies, the Balkans were an exception, with NATO's principal view to remain regional and focused on European security. For the 'new' allies, the alliance would fast morph into a 'quid pro quo' NATO, framing their crucial bilateral security relations with the

[9] White House, 'President Bush Speaks to Faculty and Students of Warsaw University', Warsaw, Poland, 15 June 2001.

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United States. Poland's decision to go with the United States into Iraq in 2003 had little to do with Middle East security, but everything to do with Poland's traditional security concerns about Russia.

In 1989 the core mission of NATO – containment and defence – was effectively nullified. Since then NATO has been struggling to articulate a mission that could be shared by its members with a degree of the conviction that marked its cold war existence. The disappearance of the Warsaw Pact led on occasion to rather humorous attempts to frame a new purpose, such as protecting the environment, fighting the drug trade, sponsoring student exchanges and developing energy-conservation technology.[10] In the end, NATO has adapted by coalescing around two objectives: enlargement and out-of-area missions. Together, these became a larger strategy of fostering stability through political and, when necessary, military means. But at a high price, including renewed hostility from Putin's Russia.

NATO's predicament is in part the legacy of a largely benign European security environment that emerged in 1989, and the policy choices made since then. NATO conceived as a collective security organisation finds it increasingly difficult to address the security challenges on the horizon of the next two decades, with regional state-on-state competition re-emerging as one of the key challenges in Asia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Africa – the last two directly on the periphery of the European Union. The experience of Kosovo raised serious concerns about the alliance's capacity to work together in terms of interoperability, with problems just as significant among the old as the new allies. While NATO enlargement has given the United States continued and transparent access to the defence planning of its European allies, it has put in question the practical military utility of the organisation so conceived.

The challenge is serious: since the Kosovo campaign the US military has come to the realisation that NATO may hinder more than help the allied military effort, notwithstanding its larger political utility. In Afghanistan the situation has become even more urgent. The 'new NATO' that emerged from the post-1989 cycles of enlargement and that was looking forward to inviting the Balkan three (Albania, Croatia and Macedonia) to join the alliance at its April 2008 NATO Bucharest summit, found itself with real military shortfalls in campaigns that require the commitment of soldiers, materiel and, above all, political will. The Bucharest summit put in sharp relief the internal tensions of the organisation. Of the intended three candidates, only Albania and Croatia received the invitation to apply for membership, while Macedonia's membership prospect was blocked by the (still continuing) Greek objection to the country's name. More significantly, with the war in Iraq constantly in view and Afghanistan becoming an ever-greater security concern, the United States found it difficult to bring Athens round on Macedonia's membership and to foster internal consensus on Georgian and Ukrainian membership. In the wake of

[10] David M. Abshire, 'Don't Muster Out NATO Yet: Its Job Is Far from Done', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 Dec. 1989.

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Bucharest it appears that the alliance might have reached the limits of enlargement for the foreseeable future.

Finally, when evaluating how NATO adapted to enlargement, one must assess the military potential of the new NATO members in terms of their ability to contribute to allied security. With the exception of Poland in 1999 and Romania in 2004, all the new allies have been small states, and the approaching post-Bucharest round is going to be increasingly marginal in terms of military power offered by prospective entrants. The seven countries brought into the alliance in 2004 were even more problematic than the 1999 group. All save for Romania were small states whose military contribution was negligible, while at the same time they accounted for seven new voices in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The incoming Balkan tranche after the Bucharest summit will be equally worrisome. Yet, as of this writing, not a single developed European democracy strong enough to contribute militarily has chosen to apply for NATO membership. Finland, Sweden and Austria could make meaningful military contributions to NATO but continue to keep away from the alliance; instead, NATO membership seems attractive only to post-communist states.

As NATO weakens, the preferred answer to central and east European security dilemmas seems to lie in the renewed emphasis on bilateralism in relations with the United States. The 2008 US–Polish and US–Czech treaties on the missile defence and radar installations are but one visible example of the growing trend towards bilateralism in US–European relations in order to compensate for the hollowing-out of NATO. Others include new base agreements between the United States and Bulgaria and Romania, or frequent direct assertions of shared strategic objectives, such as the Romanian National Security Strategy's identification of the threat of international terrorism as number one on the country's list of 'risks and threats [*sic*!]'.[11] In the end, ongoing efforts to increase the United States' security stake in each of the new democracies serve as reinsurance against the progressive weakening of NATO.

Finally, the impact of the Iraq war on NATO's post-cold war adaptation remains profound and long-lasting. In the run-up to Iraq NATO not only was largely irrelevant, but in fact experienced what Ambassador Nicolas Burns called a 'near-death' experience over the invocation of Article 4 to assist Turkey in the event of retaliatory strikes from Iraq. The crisis over NATO guarantees to Turkey showed how far the alliance has travelled not only since its heady days of solidarity during the cold war, but also from the out-of-area Balkan experience in the 1990s. To the east and central Europeans and the Balts, that was the clearest sign yet that the 'old NATO' is gone.[12] Divisions among NATO members on how to react to the summer 2008 Russo-Georgian war reinforced that view, demonstrating the political limits of the 'new NATO'.

[11] Supreme Council for National Defence, The National Security Strategy of Romania, Bucharest, 2007, 12.

[12] Author's conversations with Baltic and central European representatives to NATO, Brussels, February 2003.

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The impact on enlargement of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war

The deadlock over the invitation for Macedonia at the Bucharest summit was fast eclipsed by sharp divisions within NATO in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. At the height of the crisis French President Nicolas Sarkozy, acting on behalf of the European Union and critical of Russia, was unwilling to accept Georgia's argument that it went to war to protect its territorial integrity. In the end, France not so much mediated the conflict as negotiated a Russo-Georgian ceasefire on behalf of the European Union, without the presence at the table of the Georgian president. A number of French and German officials in private blamed Tbilisi as the party responsible for the crisis, while the United State and the 'new Europeans' took a much more pro-Georgia position. Highly symbolic displays of solidarity with Georgia by the presidents of Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, who visited Tbilisi during the fighting – with Poland's President Kaczynski declaring his readiness to 'fight' – were in sharp contrast to the low-key stance taken by Germany and France.

Most importantly, regardless of whether Tbilisi or Moscow bore the ultimate responsibility for the initiation of hostilities, the war effectively shut down discussion of near-term NATO enlargement. It came as such a shock in central and eastern Europe that it pushed Poland to conclude the negotiations on the establishment of a US anti-ballistic missile base on Polish territory, even though Warsaw originally hesitated to sign the agreement before the arrival of the new US administration. The war also put on the agenda the question of whether NATO would in fact be ready to defend its members with military force if necessary, especially the new members to the east. While few doubted that NATO would respond with force to a military attack, its stance appeared much more ambiguous when economic or political pressure short of war was considered.

Moscow's military action against Georgia in 2008 had a powerful impact on NATO's internal debates on future enlargement. It was a clear message, and it was duly noted by some members. A number of European allies have apparently concluded that NATO should not press further east, and that if further expansion of democratic state institutions is to be sustained, NATO is unlikely to serve as its vehicle in the same way as it did for the 1999 and 2004 cohorts. Today it is doubtful that Ukraine, with barely 30 per cent public support for NATO membership, can repeat the path of its neighbours to the west, notwithstanding a NATO education campaign and public diplomacy efforts. On the other hand, while the Georgian public is overwhelmingly in favour of NATO membership because of Moscow's military action against Georgia in 2008, most of Europe's capitals, including Paris and Berlin, have lost their appetite for enlargement into the Caucasus.

Transatlantic tensions and Afghanistan

Much of the current uncertainty about NATO's long-term future has been caused by the failure to match the political scope of enlargement in the 1990s with adequate military transformation, by the missed opportunities after 9/11 and by the transatlantic rift over Iraq. The gap between the United States and key European states continues to

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reflect differing threat perceptions and response strategies, despite efforts at the 2002 Prague, 2004 Istanbul, 2006 Riga and 2008 Bucharest summits to resolve differences, address key transformation issues and foster a larger consensus on mission in the spirit of 'new Atlanticism', as declared frequently by NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. Today France, Germany and several other European allies continue to disagree with the United States on strategies to suppress Islamist terrorism, solve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and resolve other security issues. The United States' views on NATO transformation are also at issue, notwithstanding the progress made since the 2002 Prague 'transformation summit'. In addition to internal NATO tensions, NATO–EU relations remain a problem.

Although the Europeans have contributed to NATO's expeditionary operations, the actual scope and the nature of the missions are very much points of contention. Likewise, the EU's drive to develop the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), despite its problems, has already affected NATO's ability to work with the European Union, with efforts at the agreed goal of strategic co-operation often falling short of expectations. Consequently, NATO is today being pulled in two directions: on the one hand, support for continued NATO enlargement and transformation to develop meaningful deployable capabilities and to assume a global expeditionary role for a broad spectrum of missions, and, on the other hand, insistence on retaining a more regional limited defensive role. The first vision of NATO's role, promoted by the United States and repeatedly articulated by various Pentagon officials and US representatives at NATO headquarters, is shared to varying degrees by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark and Italy. It is also accepted by most of the new members, who see their support for an expeditionary NATO as the quid pro quo for the continued maintenance of a credible Article 5 commitment, which they consider to be essential to their security.

At the other end of the spectrum in the debate on NATO's future is the position most forcefully articulated by France and Belgium, which see NATO as a regional security organisation devoted to continental and peripheral security. Germany, which was closer to the French position during the Schroeder government, has more recently become ambivalent in its support of the French vision, as Chancellor Angela Merkel has proved to be a NATO booster. This vision is caught up in the discussion about which areas the EU should reserve for itself, as well as about the number and level of national flag officer and command appointments within the alliance. This view sees an ever-greater role for the EU's ESDP, and would implicitly reject NATO's leading position. The Sarkozy presidency may begin to soften the French rhetoric of the Chirac era, as France raises the possibility of rejoining NATO's military structure, but nevertheless Paris continues to insist that its national prerogatives on security policy will remain paramount.

Tensions in the transatlantic relationship, especially divisions between the United States on the one hand and Germany and France on the other, carried over into the April 2008 Bucharest summit. President Bush's vocal support for the policy of continued NATO enlargement, particularly his calls for extending the MAP to Georgia and Ukraine, were blocked by Germany and France, with support from some

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other allies. When it came to issuing membership invitations to the 'Adriatic three', the United States proved unable to overcome the resistance from Greece to allowing Macedonia to join, thereby limiting the next NATO tranche to only Albania and Croatia. The best the United States could obtain in Bucharest was the commitment to keep the MAP for Georgia and Ukraine on the agenda for the future – the position later reaffirmed during the December 2008 NATO Ministerial in Brussels.

Internal policy differences notwithstanding, the outcome of NATO's operations in Afghanistan will ultimately decide the future of the alliance as a global security actor. While the NAC agreed in September 2006 to assume responsibility for all ISAF missions in Afghanistan, that political decision has failed thus far to generate sufficient military support.[13] Today NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan is struggling not only with inadequate troop numbers, insufficient to bring about stability in the south, but also with numerous national caveats that render meaningful military co-ordination among various contingents difficult to achieve.

In mid-2008 the ISAF mission deployed 52,000 troops from forty NATO members and non-NATO partners, but the insufficient number of soldiers is only part of the problem. Even in an area as critical as the national caveats imposed on the ISAF forces by participating governments, those guidelines that limit how national contingents can operate and restrict their combat use, little progress has been made: four months after the Bucharest summit the number of declared caveats dropped by only ten, from eighty-six in April 2008 to seventy-six in July. To put the capability of the enlarged NATO alliance in perspective, of the approximately 2.5 million soldiers available to NATO member states today, only some 300,000 are considered deployable, and when adequate rotation criteria are applied, the number is closer to half that.

In order to remain viable today, NATO must have a more operational focus than ever before, and if you take the US position, this operational emphasis has to continue to grow. What drives the US agenda is enlargement, but as part of a broader scope that focuses on the future of the mission in Afghanistan, dealing with threats from weapons of mass destruction and a missile defence system linking the United States and Europe. The decisive question for NATO's future is whether that US view will ultimately be shared not just by the new NATO members, but across Europe.

The balance sheet: solving Europe's problem or dismantling the alliance?

In hindsight, perhaps the greatest change in the aftermath of 1989 was the realisation that, given the institutional adaptation of NATO, geostrategic constraints in eastern and central Europe need not become national destiny again. While NATO enlargement did not fully validate the liberal argument that institutions will ultimately trump culture, it did temper the conservative realist claim that geopolitics and culture must always prevail. The greatest geostrategic legacy of 1989 may in fact be limited: when the dust has settled, Europe's boundary will have shifted to the Bug River,

[13] That sense of urgency was conveyed by the secretary of defence, Robert Gates, in a letter to the allies on the eve of the Munich Security Conference in February 2008. The message was reinforced in round-table discussion.

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the eastern Slovakian, Hungarian, Romanian and Bulgarian borders and the eastern periphery of the Baltic states. If so, the democratic states spawned by the 1989 revolution will in future have to grapple with the larger problem of the declining utility of NATO as their security framework. The core question remains whether the new NATO will endure long enough to sustain the structure of Euro-Atlantic security, as the alliance transforms itself into a collective security organisation with marginal military capabilities.

The paradox of NATO today from the vantage point of 1989 is that while enlargement was critical to the security of post-communist states, the process of external norm-setting and systemic transformation has become de facto the primary focus of the alliance. The failure of strategic vision on the part of the Bush administration when it declined the invocation of Article 5 after 9/11 and did not make Operation Enduring Freedom NATO's mission is going to become problematic for central Europe in particular, as the lasting solution to its security dilemma rests on NATO's continued viability as a premier Euro-Atlantic security link.[14]

The irony of the post-1989 transformation of NATO lies in the very success of the enlargement process. Alliances are first and foremost against something, and only derivatively serve to support shared values or common projects. The NATO that post-1989 opted to redefine itself through conditionality and norm-setting might have travelled too far from its fundamental defensive role to remain for much longer the core foundation of Euro-Atlantic security. The political project post-1989 was a resounding success; the military side of the equation proved much less so. On balance, NATO has become hollowed out, raising the question of its long-term ability to provide security to those post-communist states that originally joined the alliance to ensure their newly regained independence.

In the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, the decision to enlarge NATO to the east seemed a logical policy choice for the allies. It anchored post-communist Europe in the West, accelerated democratisation by making conditionality the centrepiece of the process and ultimately seemed to preserve the alliance itself, albeit in a vastly different form from in the cold war era. But, in hindsight, one could argue that the price the alliance has paid in terms of its mission and capabilities may ultimately prove prohibitive, as the enlargement project wagered NATO's long-term viability as the core transatlantic security anchor. Almost two decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, NATO is revisiting the core assumptions that initially drove enlargement, as it readies for another round of enlargement into the Balkans and contemplates what to do about Ukraine and Georgia.[15]

Today, notwithstanding the rhetoric of unity, the alliance remains hesitant about its overall mission and requisite capabilities, as it tries to reconcile the out-of-area

[14] A senior US military officer involved in the planning of the Afghanistan campaign compared the failure of the Bush administration to make Operation Enduring Freedom NATO's war to our inability to 'unwrap a great political gift that was offered to us'. Conversation with the author, 6 April 2007.

[15] See, for example, Ronald D. Asmus, 'Europe's Eastern Promise: Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement', *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2008; or Ilana Bet-El and Rupert Smith, 'The Bell Tolls for NATO', *National Interest*, January–February 2008.

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experience of the Balkan wars with its post-9/11 tasks. Paradoxically, the more NATO has expanded to foster the military–political security of the new democratic states of eastern and south-eastern Europe, the less it seems capable of dealing with real security threats like Afghanistan and Iraq. With NATO all but absent in Iraq and facing the possible strategic failure of its ISAF mission in Afghanistan, we need to ask whether the policy track chosen post-1989 has been the right one.[16] To paraphrase Senator Lugar's famous dictum: are we only now beginning to realise that while NATO has gone 'out-of-area' it may also very well go 'out of business'? It seems that nobody has the courage to admit that just yet.

[16] The NATO training centre for the Iraqi forces in Al Rustamiya has been one of the few bright spots in NATO assistance in Iraq.

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