

# **NATO's Eastern Agenda \_\_\_\_\_ in a \_\_\_\_\_ New Strategic Era**

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Press Point between President Vaclav Havel (right) and NATO Secretary  
General Lord Robertson (left) at the Prague Castle.*

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## SUMMARY

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Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has undergone a major process of adaptation and change. One of the key elements of this transformation has been the development of a new “Eastern agenda.” The centerpiece of this new agenda has been NATO’s eastward enlargement.

The Prague summit in November 2002 opened a new stage in NATO’s approach to the East. At the summit, the NATO Heads of State and Governments agreed to extend membership invitations to seven countries—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In inviting these new countries to join the Alliance, the NATO Heads of State and Government took a major step toward overcoming the division of Europe and creating a “Europe whole and free.” However, NATO’s Eastern agenda is by no means finished. It has simply been transformed. In the wake of the Prague summit, NATO still faces a number of critical challenges in the East.

### **CONSOLIDATING THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

The first challenge in the post-Prague period is to ensure that the consolidation process in Central and Eastern Europe continues and that there is no backsliding. This is important because the process of democratic consolidation remains fragile in some of the newly invited states.

At the same time, NATO needs to ensure that the first three Central European allies, as well as those invited to join at Prague, continue to modernize their military forces and make them interoperable with those of NATO. This is particularly relevant in the case of those candidates invited to join at Prague. While many of them have made substantial progress toward modernizing their militaries in the last few years, their forces remain well below NATO standards.

This does not mean, however, that the new members should invest in high-tech weaponry or try to duplicate the force structure of the more advanced members of the Alliance. This would not be a wise use of their limited resources—and, in any event, it would be beyond their means. Rather, the new invitees should be encouraged to develop niche capabilities and specialized units that can help plug gaps where specific capabilities are lacking or needed.

In the coming decade, the United States is likely to restructure its force posture in Europe, moving toward lighter, more flexible and agile units. As part of a restructuring of its force posture in Europe, the United States should consider using training facilities in Eastern Europe and perhaps redeploying some of its forces in Western Europe to Central and Eastern Europe. Repositioning some U.S. forces to Eastern Europe and/or heavier reliance on East European bases or facilities for training purposes would enable the United States to move some of its forces closer to the new centers of potential conflict such as the Caucasus or Middle East. It would also allow the United States to avoid many of the environmental restrictions on exercises that its troops currently face, especially in Germany. Finally, it would be a strong political signal of U.S. commitment to the security of these countries and could help to promote greater political stability and regional security over the long run.

Any restructuring of the U.S. force posture, however, should be undertaken only after careful study of the broader political, economic, and military costs of such a move and only after close consultation with our European allies in NATO. While there is a strong strategic case for some restructuring of the U.S. force posture in Europe in light of the changed security environment since the end of the Cold War, the strategic rationale has to be carefully explained to our European NATO allies *before* undertaking any redeployment.

Otherwise, the move could be perceived as an effort to “punish” certain allies (especially Germany) or as an indication of a declining U.S. interest in Europe.

Finally, NATO will need to remain engaged in the Balkans. Despite recent progress, the situation in the Balkans remains unstable. As a result, some Western military presence is likely to be needed there for some time. However, the military requirements are not everywhere the same. NATO can afford to gradually reduce its presence in Bosnia. Many of the functions that NATO troops have performed there can be better carried out by paramilitary police forces. Kosovo, however, is a different matter. There the potential for instability and renewed violence still remains high. Some NATO presence, therefore, is likely to be necessary for quite a while.

Increasingly, however, the Balkans are likely to become an EU responsibility. The main problems in the region are social and economic. The EU is better equipped to manage those problems than is NATO. Thus, over time the institutional balance in the region is likely to increasingly shift toward the EU. However, the EU needs to develop a coherent, long-term strategy for the Balkans. While the Greek presidency pushed for a more active and comprehensive approach to the region, many EU members still consider membership for the countries of the region premature.

## **ENSURING THE SECURITY OF THE BALTIC STATES**

The second challenge in the post-Prague period is to ensure the security of the Baltic states. However, the Baltic agenda is changing. For a decade after the end of the Cold War, the key challenge was to integrate the Baltic states into Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially NATO. With the invitations at Prague and Copenhagen, this goal has largely been achieved. At the same time, those invitations raise a number of new challenges.

The first is to maintain American engagement in the Baltic region. The United States has been one of the strongest supporters of Baltic membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially NATO. However, with the entry of the Baltic states into NATO, there is a danger that the United States will essentially regard the Baltic problem as “fixed” and lose interest in the region. Thus, the Baltic states will

need to find a new way—a new strategic agenda—to keep the United States engaged at a time when U.S. attention and resources are increasingly focused on issues outside of Europe.

This agenda should include four key elements: (1) enhancing cooperation with Russia, (2) stabilizing Kaliningrad, (3) promoting the democratization of Belarus, and (4) supporting Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. At the same time, some of the mechanisms for bilateral cooperation such as the Baltic Partnership Commission may need to be revamped to give a larger role to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.

Second, the United States and its European allies need to ensure that the Article 5 commitment is not a hollow “paper commitment.” Although enlargement is mainly being carried out for political reasons, the military dimensions remain important. The United States and its NATO allies need to determine the military requirements to carry out a credible Article 5 commitment and ensure that they have the means to implement it.

However, it is by no means clear that the model for defending Central Europe is suitable for the Baltic region. Changes in war-fighting and technology—above all the use of precision-guided weapons and network-centric warfare—may give NATO new options for defending the Baltic states. They may also reduce the relevance of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, since these options would not require large amounts of Treaty-Limited Equipment (TLE) stationed on Baltic soil. Thus, NATO needs to look with a fresh eye at the implementation of a defense commitment to the Baltic states.

Third, U.S. policymakers need to ensure that there is no backsliding from democratic reform and social tolerance in the Baltic states. All three Baltic states need to make an honest reckoning with the past, including the Holocaust. In addition, they need to do more to root out corruption. This is particularly true in the case of Latvia, whose record is the weakest in this regard.

Finally, the problem of Kaliningrad is likely to become more significant in the post-Prague period. If the economic gap between Kaliningrad and its neighbors continues to increase, it could lead to

the growth of separatist pressures in Kaliningrad. However, as the recent tensions with the EU over the transit issue illustrate, Kaliningrad is a sensitive issue for Moscow. Thus, it may be better for the United States to maintain a low profile and encourage others, especially the EU and Nordic states, to take the lead in dealing with Kaliningrad. Such an approach is likely to be more successful—and less threatening to Moscow—than if the United States attempts to play a highly visible role in addressing the Kaliningrad issue.

### **DEVELOPING A POST-ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY FOR UKRAINE**

The third challenge is to develop a post-enlargement strategy for Ukraine designed to support Ukraine's continued democratic evolution and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Ukraine's image has been tarnished recently by some of its recent policies, particularly President Leonid Kuchma's crackdown on the media and the alleged sale of radars to Iraq. But while pressing Kuchma to carry out a broad program of economic and political reform, U.S. and European policymakers should not lose sight of the West's broader, long-term strategic objectives regarding Ukraine.

Kuchma's term will run out in early 2004 and under the Ukrainian constitution he cannot run again. Former prime minister Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western reformer, is likely to be a strong contender in the 2004 presidential elections if he can keep the reform coalition together. His election could give a new impetus to reform in Ukraine and open new opportunities to integrate Ukraine more closely into Euro-Atlantic structures. Thus Western policymakers need to look beyond the Kuchma era and develop a coherent, long-term strategy toward Ukraine.

Ukraine's decision to apply for NATO membership gives the development of a post-enlargement strategy for Ukraine greater urgency. However, Ukraine has a long way to go before it qualifies for membership. Civilian control of the military is weak. Ukraine also needs to do much more to develop a viable market economy and stable democracy. Thus, NATO needs to work with Ukraine to help it improve its qualifications for membership.

Partnership for Peace (PfP) can play an important role in this regard and can help Ukrainian forces to work more efficiently with NATO forces. PfP exercises give Ukrainian officers and staff experience in working with NATO on a day-to-day basis. NATO should also assist Ukraine in carrying out a comprehensive program of military reform.

At the same time, the United States and its European allies should continue to encourage the Ukrainian leadership to implement economic and political reform. While significant steps were taken in this regard under Yushchenko, there has been little progress since his resignation in April 2001. The Ukrainian leadership needs to understand that without the implementation of a coherent reform program, Ukraine's "European Choice" will remain a mirage.

#### **DEEPENING THE RUSSIA-NATO PARTNERSHIP**

The fourth challenge in the post-Prague period is to incorporate Russia into a broader European and Euro-Atlantic security framework. An attempt was made to do this in the mid-1990s, but that effort was hindered by a number of factors, particularly differences over NATO's air campaign against Serbia. However, President Putin's decision to openly support the United States in the war on terrorism opens up new prospects for developing a more cooperative partnership between Russia and NATO.

A lot will depend on how well the newly established NATO-Russia Council (NRC)—which supersedes the old Permanent Joint Council (PJC)—will function. The success of the new council will depend to a large extent on its ability to promote *practical cooperation* in areas of common interest. Rather than getting hung up on procedural issues, NATO and Russia need to identify a few specific areas of cooperation where they can show concrete, tangible results quickly. This will demonstrate to skeptical publics, Russian and Western alike, that cooperation is feasible and give momentum to further collaboration.

NATO also needs to begin to think about its longer-term goals vis-à-vis Russia. Defining the endgame at this point, however, may be premature. Russia has not expressed an interest in membership. Moreover, its transition is far from complete—and may not be for quite a while. Thus, it may be better to leave aside the issue of the

endgame for the moment and let interests develop organically. If collaboration gradually deepens and expands, it could lay the groundwork for a different type of relationship over time.

### **ENGAGEMENT IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA**

Finally, in the post-Prague period U.S. policymakers need to give more thought to NATO's future role in the Caucasus and Central Asia. A few years ago, NATO's involvement in these regions would not have been high on the priority list of most Western policymakers. However, the events of September 11 and the war on terrorism have increased the strategic importance of both regions. Moreover, Georgia's decision to apply for membership, announced at the Prague summit, gives this issue new urgency.

For the foreseeable future cooperation within PfP will provide the basic framework for developing relations with these countries. The main focus should be on activities such as search and rescue, disaster relief, and peace support operations. Cooperation in these areas can not only help strengthen ties to NATO but also lay the foundation for broader regional cooperation. At the same time, Western policymakers need to continue to nudge the rulers in the Caucasus and Central Asia toward greater openness and reform. Political change, especially in Central Asia, will not come quickly. But NATO-sponsored activities designed to encourage greater democratic practices, responsible budgeting, and civilian control of the military can help to foster political change over the long run.

### **NATO'S BROADER TRANSFORMATION**

Promoting stability in the East, however, is not an end in itself. It was always regarded as part of a broader agenda designed to unify Europe and reshape the Alliance to deal with new threats—most of which come from beyond Europe's shores. This broader agenda has taken on greater urgency and importance since September 11. The key question in the post-Prague period concerns NATO's broader transformation and strategic purpose—that is, "What is NATO for?" What should be its main missions and strategic rationale in the future?

The Alliance currently stands at a watershed, one as important, if not more important, than the one it faced at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today NATO's strategic agenda—German unification, the integration of Central and Eastern Europe, partnership with Russia, and stabilization of the Balkans—is largely complete or nearly complete. As a result, Europe is increasingly stable and secure.

At the same time, NATO faces a series of new threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Most of these threats come from beyond Europe's borders. Moreover, they are often posed by nonstate rather than state actors. In the future, these are likely to pose the most serious threats to Alliance security. Thus, the United States and its European allies must have the capacity to deal with them.

Managing these new challenges—both in the East and beyond Europe's borders—will require enlightened and sustained U.S. leadership. The United States, however, has sent mixed signals regarding NATO lately. While official U.S. statements continue to stress the continued importance of NATO, some U.S. policymakers seem to fear that operating jointly with America's NATO allies will restrict America's freedom of action.

Such a view, however, is shortsighted. While the United States is the world's sole remaining superpower, it cannot solve all problems on its own. Moreover, many of the challenges the United States faces—especially the war on terrorism—require cooperation with America's European allies and other partners on a broad range of issues that extend beyond the military realm. Hence, NATO will remain an essential forum for coordinating Euro-Atlantic strategic cooperation as well as a vehicle for developing the military capabilities to deal with both old and new challenges.

In many instances, NATO as an organization is unlikely to act collectively outside of Europe. Most non-European operations will be conducted by "coalitions of the willing." However, U.S. and European forces will be better able to operate together in such instances if they have trained together and have similar operational doctrines and procedures. NATO's patterns of multilateral training and joint command structures provide a firmer basis for shared

military actions beyond Europe than any other framework available to the United States and its allies. Thus, NATO will remain a critical vehicle for ensuring interoperability between U.S. and European forces. Indeed, this may prove to be its most important military function.