

Prague NATO summit: internal tensions near the breaking point

Peter Schwarz
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“Transformation” and “conversion” were the key words to be heard at the NATO summit that met in the Czech capital on November 21-22. According to the official interpretation, the military and political alliance was being re-established on a new basis.

The Prague Summit Declaration, begins:

“We met today to enlarge our Alliance and further strengthen NATO to meet the grave new threats and profound security challenges of the twenty-first century.... we commit ourselves to transforming NATO with new members, new capabilities and new relationships with our partners.”

If one examines the summit more closely, however, it becomes clear that the terms “decline” and “disintegration” are more appropriate. Despite the ceremonious statements of intent and unanimous decisions in Prague, the Atlantic Alliance is drifting apart. Behind the scenes there were fierce confrontations, in particular between the US on the one side and Germany and France on the other. The assembled government heads smiled for the cameras, but closed meetings were characterised by bitter infighting. Negotiators haggled over every word in the official statement, while lower echelons of the delegations supplied the media with derogatory comments about rival politicians.

The deep divisions within NATO were most clear in relation to the central issue confronting the summit—the preparations for war with Iraq.

After torturous nightlong wrestling over the exact phrasing of the text, the summit decided on a resolution that broadly reflected the European standpoint. It supported the UN resolution that “warned Iraq of the serious consequences should it continue to violate its responsibilities.”

The US had attempted to obtain a pledge of NATO support for military action against Iraq. Its resolution declared that NATO was “ready” for a military assault. Germany and France rejected this resolution and insisted that the UN remain involved in the issue of Iraq.

The German-French victory was Pyrrhic. The wheeling and dealing over formulations will do nothing to deter the preparations for war with Iraq. The US government made unmistakably clear that it is not prepared to be restricted by Alliance decisions. During the Prague summit it submitted written requests to 50 governments—members and non-members of NATO—asking whether they were willing to take part in a US-led military action against Iraq.

In so doing, as one newspaper commented, the US government confronted NATO with an alternative alliance—an “alliance of the willing”. In fact, the American initiative confirmed the US vision for the future of NATO—not a partnership of equals, but rather a “toolbox” at the disposal of the US, to be utilised according to American military requirements.

Not surprisingly, such a prospect was greeted with little enthusiasm in European capitals. Reactions ranged from attempts to curry favour (London, Rome and Madrid) to throwing sand in the gears (Paris and Berlin). But, in the final analysis, European governments have little with which they can counter Washington.

Since the conclusion of the summit, both the French and German governments have made clear that they will do nothing to impede the US should it go to war with Iraq. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder publicly stated in Prague that, in the event of war, the US would have full access to German airspace, airports, ports and its own bases in Germany. “We do not intend to limit the room for manoeuvrability of our friends,” he said. Many commentaries have interpreted this statement as a retreat from the position Schröder adopted in the recent election campaign, i.e., a categorical “no” to a war with Iraq.

The summit in Prague agreed on two additional measures that were praised by NATO General Secretary George Robertson as important contributions to the “transformation” of the alliance: the construction of a new intervention force and the expansion of NATO from its current 19 members to a total of 26. Profound differences lie behind both of these decisions.

The NATO Response Force (NRF) was first proposed by US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. It is due to come into service in October 2004 and have the capability to intervene anywhere in the world within a few days. It is, however, highly questionable whether this force will ever come into being.

Opinions over the exact nature of the NRF vary widely. There is no agreement over the terms of intervention, nor the force’s composition, nor how it should be financed. As a result, the summit established a military committee with the task of working out a plan for the new force by next spring.

As a result of pressure from Germany and other European governments, it was stipulated that the force could be activated only by consensus, i.e., by unanimous agreement of all 26 NATO members. In addition, the interventions of the NRF are to take into account the constitutions of the individual member countries. In the case of Germany, this means the parliament would have to

agree to an NRF mission. Such provisions are regarded as insurance against any unilateral actions mounted at the instigation of the US.

Sharp differences also emerged on the relationship of the new force to the plans of the European Union for its own intervention army, which is due to come into service next year. On the insistence of the German delegation, it was agreed in Prague that the two forces should “complement one another.” In practice, however, this will inevitably prove impossible, since both intervention armies must compete for personnel as well as financial and technical resources, all of which are in short supply.

The decision by the summit to adopt Rumania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as NATO members in 2004 is largely of symbolic significance. It means that a large number of countries that were formerly members of the Warsaw Pact alliance, as well as three former Soviet republics, have become part of a Western alliance. In a military sense, the new members have little to offer in the way of strengthening NATO. Estonia has an army of just 5,600 soldiers; Latvia, 6,500; and Slovenia, 7,600. Impoverished Romania is the only new NATO member to have a population of over 20 million, more than the other six new members put together.

Many of the government heads from the new member countries spent decades in the Stalinist apparatus. The Romanian Ion Iliescu joined the Communist Party in 1953 and for a period was regarded as a favourite of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. Milan Kucan was the leader of Slovenia’s Communist Party, and the Slovakian Rudolf Schuster was head of government prior to the collapse of the Stalinist block. The leading Estonian delegate, Arnold Rüütel, is a former chairman of the Supreme Soviet.

In Europe, the admission of the new members is increasingly regarded as nothing more than an American spoiling tactic. An article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* by a reporter with close links to the German delegation provides a sense of the bitter state of relations within NATO. The magazine quotes one European NATO delegate as saying the new members are “compliant candidates” who are already “acting more American than the Americans.”

It further reports that the German delegation made caustic comments about the “inner and outer ring of satrap states which, during the evening meal, gathered round Bush as if he were a monarch—first and foremost, the Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi.”

Critical observers have taken note of the growing crisis within NATO. The Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* commented on the summit: “The transatlantic alliance has clearly changed over the last few years. In a number of respects the US and its West European partners have become estranged: their dialogue, to the extent it takes place, is characterised by impatience and lack of understanding. The security political consensus has become brittle to an unprecedented extent.”

The centrifugal forces within NATO have their roots in the changed character of the alliance itself. During the Cold War, a common enemy and the unchallenged dominance of the US helped secure a large degree of stability. The tasks of NATO were strictly limited to the defence of its own territory.

Since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, NATO has changed from a regional defensive body into a globally operating offensive alliance. Participation in the American-launched operation “Enduring Freedom,” together with agreement on the NATO Response Force, means that European governments have basically accepted this change.

In the name of the struggle against terrorism and the threat from weapons of mass destruction the great powers have adopted a policy of re-dividing the world among themselves. At stake are raw materials, markets, trade routes and strategic influence.

In the long run it will prove impossible to arrive at any sort of consensus. From an alliance of nations with common interests, NATO has been transformed into a battlefield where conflicting powers bitterly contest for influence. Prague represents a milestone in this process.

For the time being, European governments are reluctant to engage the US in an open conflict. They are deterred by the economic and military dominance of the US as well as the divisions in their own ranks. Foreign policy conflicts with Europe’s most important trading partner would have significant consequences for European economies already plagued by economic problems.

An open breach in the Atlantic Alliance would have far-reaching implications for the stability in Europe. In recent months, pressure from Washington has brought Paris and Berlin closer together. In the long term, however, a withdrawal by the US would inevitably raise the old issue of which country should dominate the European continent.

But sooner or later an open conflict between Europe and the US is unavoidable. European governments are preparing for such a contingency with moves to accelerate rearmament. The summit had only just concluded when the German and French foreign ministers, Joschka Fischer and Dominique de Villepin, spoke out in favour of a joint paper calling for the extension of the European Union into a “European Security and Defence Union”. The paper is directed towards the EU constitutional convention as the basis for the elaboration of a European constitution.

In unison, the German Green Party minister and his Gaullist colleague called for the strengthening of the “European pillars of NATO” and the creation of a “European security culture”. Fischer and de Villepin are in favour of close collaboration in the development of new weapons systems for a joint “armaments market”, to be supported by a “European armaments agency”.



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