

Post-Communist Europe and the Challenge of a Divided West

Will the new democracies allow themselves once again to become satellites in a renewed “Europe of the Great Powers?”

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Through their unequivocal support for the United States since the beginning of the current crisis in Iraq, the countries of the post-communist East have created a new major dividing line across the Old Continent. This new cleavage separates largely pacifist Western Europe from the pro-Atlantic countries in Eastern Europe. All governments and major political parties in Eastern Europe, including the post-communist parties, have backed America during the Iraq crisis. This is true despite the doubts and reservations that those countries harbor about the foreign policy style of the current conservative administration in Washington.

Why did the East European countries run the risk of provoking the anger of their Western European patrons by signing up for the US-led “coalition of the willing?” It is impossible to answer this question using simply moral categories and the language of democratic values. By joining the community and the institutions of the West – namely, NATO and the European Union – post-communist Eastern Europe made its democratic and civilizational choice. It is not a question of moral judgement to choose between Germany and the United States. The difference in those two countries’ positions is not a conflict between good and evil, but rather a dispute over competing strategic visions, reflecting different but equally legitimate interests.

Eastern Europe’s decision to favor the US in the Iraqi crisis is an expression of a deeply motivated and pragmatic choice. It reflects the common, long-term strategic interests of these countries. Their interests are based entirely on a presumption of unity among the Euro-Atlantic nations and the idea that the European security equation requires active US involvement.

After the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989, Central and East European societies entered a period of painful social, economic, and institutional transformation marked by dramatic security dilemmas. New problems included the fragility of the newly established democratic systems, the tough transition to market economies, corruption in the privatization processes, the weakness and the ineffectiveness of national institutions to represent public interests, and the emergence of ethnic conflicts. These factors compelled Eastern Europe to pin its hopes on the possibility of Western support to solve the problems of transition. Eastern governments initially expected Western assistance for their transition to come primarily from the European Union, whose wealthy member states had overcome similar crises after the Second World War with the support of the Marshall Plan. Easterners thought that Western Europe therefore

had the historic obligation to reciprocate by supporting the transition of East Europe through rapid EU enlargement. In fact, however, Western Europe was slow to provide assistance to its Eastern neighbors. After “adopting” its eastern provinces in 1990, the newly united Germany and its European partners indefinitely postponed effective EU enlargement, thus leaving East Europe to cope on its own.

West European governments’ slow pace in accepting new member-states or in undertaking any effective endeavors like the Marshall Plan was coupled with the failure to respond adequately to the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia. Instead of coming up with a common European policy, the major European states followed piecemeal and often contradictory policies, inherited from the age of the European “Great Powers”. Germany recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, cutting off the rest of ex-Yugoslavia to its own fate. France and Great Britain discreetly but resolutely supported their favorite (since the beginning of the 20th century) Serbia – even though governed by a brutal dictator.

It was the reappearance of the US as a powerful factor on the European stage that provided post-communist Eastern Europe with new hopes for resolving the economic and security dilemmas of its transition. US-led NATO intervention in Bosnia brought about the Dayton Peace Accords. The decision of Bill Clinton’s administration to expand NATO to the East compensated, at least partially, for the postponed enlargement of the EU. The countries of post-communist Eastern Europe acknowledged the role of the US and of the transatlantic community as the only available and real opportunity for addressing their security dilemma.

Here, of course, skeptics and cynics might smile condescendingly and ask something like, “How *exactly* has the United States helped you with NATO enlargement?” The answer is simple and includes a series of concrete facts. Foreign investments have increased markedly in the countries of the first wave of NATO enlargement (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic). National security institutions have become significantly more effective in those countries. The most important benefits of NATO expansion are the incentives for candidates to reshape their national institutions according to the standards of the Western member states.

The Eastern European countries’ aspirations to join NATO and the Clinton- and Bush administrations’ support for the enlargement have, in practice, generated stimuli for the evolution of NATO itself. NATO was originally a military and political alliance designed to protect Western security by containing the Soviet threat. Since the beginning of expansion, NATO has evolved towards a pan-European, Euro-Atlantic collective security system. At this very moment, when deteriorating relations between Washington, Paris and Berlin have brought NATO to the verge of an internal crisis, the significance of sustaining and consolidating the North Atlantic Alliance is more important than ever.

For the Eastern European post-communist countries, the significance of sustaining and furthering the transatlantic partnership, however, goes beyond the agenda of the painful transformation towards political democracy, market economy and institutional effectiveness. Central and East Europe are regions of traditional strategic instability; countries here have been vulnerable to the European Great Powers' influence for centuries. The Cold War froze the dilemmas of traditional divisions and conflicts in East Europe. America's presence – through NATO – in the Western European security equation was the primary factor that allowed the main Euro-Atlantic partners of France, Germany and Great Britain to overcome their own negative legacy of conflicts. And while broad circles on the anti-American left and Gaullist right in Western Europe admit that Europe is mature enough to preserve its unity and its peace without the commitment of the United States, the countries of Central and East Europe believe otherwise.

Citizens of contemporary Poland retain clear historical memories of their powerful neighbors, Germany and Russia, tearing their country apart for centuries. Immediately after Poland's independence was restored in 1919, Warsaw tried to involve a third power factor in its national security equation. The third power factor were France and Great Britain, which ultimately undertook the commitment to guarantee Polish independence and sovereignty. In September 1939, however, it became clear that those guarantees were not worth even the paper they were written on. Nowadays, NATO and the United States through NATO serve as the third independent factor in the Polish security equation, guaranteeing that Poland will not be crushed and partitioned between its powerful neighbors. The United States, through NATO, provides similar guarantees to the small Baltic republics, to the Czech Republic and Hungary. For Romania and Bulgaria NATO is a powerful factor also in the regional - Balkan - equilibrium of national security.

The Iraqi crisis provided anti-American circles in Europe and anti-European, conservative groups in the United States with the grounds for questioning the value and perspectives of the transatlantic partnership and the security cooperation between Europe and the United States. The traditional deafening ideological anti-Americanism of the European left is now joined by the revived ambition of the French Gaullism. By isolating Europe from the US, the Gaullists seek to restore the "French *grandeur*" on the platform of "a united Europe – from the Atlantic to the Urals." This utopian formula from the 1960s is now gaining a new sense. "From the Atlantic to the Urals" means the isolation of the United States from the European security and political integration formulae, and inclusion of Russia into it. This Gaullist formula has always been quite attractive to Moscow. The Kremlin's main strategic aim after 1945 has always been to break down the transatlantic alliance and to transform Europe into a helpless geopolitical appendix to a Russian dominated Eurasia. Undoubtedly, Russia, which suffered a humiliating defeat in the Cold War, is now very pleased to contemplate the revival of "Euro-Ural" utopia of Paris. Moreover, Berlin's powerful pacifism seems to satisfy another of the Kremlin's strategic dreams from the Cold war period – the dream of a "neutralized Germany." Once Moscow made sure that Paris and

Berlin are seriously evolving in this direction, the Kremlin felt free to give up the strategy for closer links with Washington that had come into play after September 11. Thus Russia has returned to the long-term, fundamental goals of its imperial European policy, hardening its position on the Iraqi crisis and backing the French-German coalition.

Prominent ideologists of the radical conservative right in the United States have also greatly contributed to harming and breaking up traditional transatlantic relations. Arrogant and imbued with the self-confidence of the “only superpower,” these gentlemen are ready to turn their back on the most significant and effective defense union in human history. They would sacrifice the North Atlantic Alliance in favor of vague ideological constructions such as the “coalition of the willing.” The anti-European pathos in Washington’s corridors of power has two main sources. The first of these is the fundamentalist religious right that traditionally seems to see Satan in the form of the European Union. The second source of anti-European sentiment is the neo-conservative “Project for a New American Century.” This project substitutes the priority of multilateral cooperation within the Western Alliance with unilateral responsibility and power politics. It aims to guarantee the national security of the only superpower by military means through flexible, situational alliances all over the world. Certainly, the shock of 9/11 has increased the potential of these US national security ideological formulae.

The risks of disintegrating transatlantic cooperation in the field of security have global importance and potential impact. This article does not aim to address them all. Instead, the more humble aim here is to formulate the challenges to Central and Eastern Europe that would result from the decline of the Atlantic Alliance.

The first consequence of the disintegration of the transatlantic cooperation will be the increase of Russia’s influence and control over post-communist Europe. Paradoxically enough, the conservative pundits in Washington who talk about abandoning the “old Europe” and a shift towards the “new Europe,” do not understand that the immediate result of such weakening of the Atlantic partnership will be the steadily increasing role of Russia in Eastern Europe. In its ambition to restore its control over at least some of its former Soviet possessions, Moscow will not face the resistance, but will most likely enjoy understanding and support on behalf of “neutralized Germany” and Gaullist France. The fact that Russia is not yet a truly democratic country, and that the Kremlin's imperial nostalgia is far from dead will hardly be of any importance. The well-known 19th century “Great Powers” play of “Great France,” “Great Russia,” and, perhaps “Great Pacified Germany” will be staged again. The “Great Powers” will master the fate of the smaller and vulnerable European nations, dividing them into “spheres of influence.”

The European Left, imbued with ideological anti-Americanism, does not understand that if the North Atlantic Alliance disintegrates, the revival of this new-old Europe will be inevitable. The European leftists have a long history of serving noble, but illusory

causes, which have made them easy victims of the Soviet and the Chinese communist propaganda strategies since the 1920s till the very end of the Cold War. The mass scale anti-war campaigns of today, with all their powerful humane and idealistic potential, neglect the dividing line between pacifist protest against the current US government and militant anti-Americanism, deepening the transatlantic gap.

However, the societies in post-communist Europe do see the danger. They possess a sensibility engendered by a long tradition of partition, subjugation and maltreatment of the vulnerable, small, Eastern nations that resulted not only from regional conflicts but also from unequal partnerships with the "Great European Powers." So while the European Union might be an adequate guarantee for the social and economic development of Eastern Europeans, it is not an adequate guarantee for security. The reason is simple – the EU's common foreign and security policy has never been more than a good intention. Behind this intention, the interests of the big countries in the EU – the former "Great Powers" of Europe – have always been effectively enforced. Therefore, the security and development strategy of each of the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe requires each of two equally significant priorities – membership in NATO and membership in the EU. The current crisis in NATO and the Alliance's potential disintegration will significantly damage the very prospects of European integration for these states. Instead of the long-desired membership in the Club of the wealthy, free and equal nations, Eastern European countries could end up becoming satellites of their nearest European "Great Powers."

Eastern European support for the United States in the Iraqi crisis is neither a token of servility nor of absolute and uncritical consent with the global policy of the present conservative administration in Washington. This support is an expression of the long-term and vital national interests of all Eastern European post-communist countries, which require the continued existence of the transatlantic partnership and the role of the United States within it. Therefore, no matter how paradoxical it could seem at first sight, East Europe (together with Great Britain, Italy, Spain) has supported the United States in the Iraqi crisis with the same arguments that France and Germany have used to refuse such support.

The principle of multilateralism, partnership and shared responsibility in international relations is of supreme value for the East Europeans. The unilateralism practiced by the present administration in Washington can obviously not serve as a basis for effective partnership with a "new Europe" in the long run. Nor could such a policy have worked with the "old Europe." Significant differences between the positions of the American conservatives and the East Europeans will inevitably emerge when defining the threshold of the use of armed force. President Bush's administration quite dramatically lowered this threshold after September 11. Eastern European countries, having suffered numerous conflicts and aggressions in their history, believe that the use of armed force is unacceptable before all other means for crisis settlement have proven unproductive. Those standpoints bring Eastern Europe much closer to the Western European concept of interdependence policies, rather than to the strategies of an open power policy.

While supporting unconditionally the US over Iraq, Eastern Europe has found that British Prime Minister Tony Blair, rather than President Bush, is its closest partner. Blair ran the enormous risk of confronting his own party. He also put his brilliant political career at stake in order to defend his strategic vision in the difficult period of transatlantic drift. The British Prime Minister values equally the goals of partnership between Europe and the US and of European integration. These two goals will never be successfully achieved if they are disassociated from one another. Of course, Blair defends primarily British national interest. But he also defends the importance of the Western alliance facing the challenges of the future. Eastern Europeans have the same vision and the same goals. The only question is whether they will be able to stand up for them.

The essence of Eastern European policy after 1989 was to follow the example of the West. Nowadays, however, this is not enough. Moreover, the “West” is obviously not the same as it was back then. The new democracies need a new, active and integrated policy to defend the pro-Atlantic Europe against the re-emergence of a Europe of the “Great Powers” along the lines of the 19th century “European Concert”. The Atlantic cause is not irrevocably lost. New governments will come into power both in Berlin and Washington and will assess in a more balanced and reasonable way the significance of transatlantic cooperation. Western Europe is divided over its views on the future of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Our stand – the stand of the new democracies in East Europe – could prove critical for sustaining and revitalizing NATO. The North Atlantic Alliance, which is the most successful alliance in history, will thus ultimately safeguard our common future.