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Can NATO's enlargement be unlimited? A positive answer to this question could imply, as an extreme option, the transformation of NATO into a world organization. But an organization with global responsibilities already exists: the United Nations. It is not a system of collective defence, but through the Security Council it has a fundamental role -indeed, the central one- in promoting peace and security worldwide. Moreover, since 1992, the debate over the reform of the UN general structure, and of the SC in particular, has emphasized the necessity of a substantial reinforcement of its capabilities, especially in the security field. One of the central issues of this debate is the functional and institutional relationship to be built between a reinforced UN and NATO in view of the establishment of a stable security system in Europe. The role of NATO is generally considered of key importance but necessarily limited to the European continent and the Transatlantic area.

An «unlimited» enlargement of NATO is not a viable option; NATO's frontiers need to be drawn in Europe. The real concern is whether and to what extent these frontiers should be re-drawn further East in Europe.

1. The dramatic changes occurred in European geopolitics during the last five years have brought about the necessity of a redefinition of the security policy of the continent as a whole. The Cold War bipolar division had shaped Europe into antagonizing blocks which corresponded to two security systems: the Western, US-led, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Eastern, Russian-led, Warsaw Pact.

It has been suggested that, with the Soviet collapse, the Alliance has fulfilled its historical role, and it could thus break up. This argument, however simplistic it can sound, stimulates important reflections concerning the very role that NATO should assume in the changed European environment and, consequently, the form and composition that a reshaped alliance should take.

The creation of NATO in 1949 was meant to protect and strengthen democracy in the West by deterring Soviet expansion; arguably, the dissolution of the Eastern block -expressed in the field of security with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991- and the collapse of the Soviet

Union have erased both the political and the military *raison d'être* of the Alliance. On the other hand, the Central and Eastern European Countries need assistance to forge their new democracies, and to overcome their internal political, economic and security problems; moreover, they suffer from a «security vacuum» due to the absence of external security guarantees. As a matter of fact, most of them see NATO's protection as an «anchor of stability».

The new task of the Allies is to help building up a new security order for Eastern Europe, whereby preventing the possible negative outcomes of the new situation, such as the re-emergence of inter-ethnic strives or the resurgence of nationalism, which might jeopardize the developing democratic processes and ultimately affect the stability of the whole Europe.

NATO's function has thus changed: from a preeminent Western collective defence function of «shield» against the Soviet menace, NATO has moved to a broader role as a framework for stability and security for all of Europe. The new fundamental task is the preservation of the collective security through a system that is no longer against a specific foe, but aims at guaranteeing each country, and the continent, against the threats that might endanger its stability.

It has to be seen if and how the two functions, the core mission of defence of the alliance and the broader task of projection of stability, can be reconciled. Another special concern remains the attitude to be adopted towards Russia. If the democratic experiment undertaken by the Russian Federation should fail, and nationalist and imperialist forces should achieve power, that would pose a great threat to European security and possibly to the independence of some states which were formerly part of the Soviet block. The Western countries face the following dilemma: on the one hand there is a necessity to preserve the alliance as an instrument of protection against the possible re-emergence of a neoimperialist attitude in Russia; on the other hand a Russian isolation might result in the intensification of neoimperialist drives. Russia should not be excluded from the ongoing dialogue between West and East; however, there are objective difficulties that make the possibility of an integration of Russia in the alliance unlikely. Due to its territorial extension, its military strength and its large natural resources, Russia cannot be integrated in the Western institutional framework without dramatic -and indeed unmanageable- consequences. This might be assumed as a first and fundamental limitation of a potential enlargement of NATO in Europe.

2. The first phase of the institutionalised dialogue between NATO and its former foes was opened through the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991. At that

stage, it was widely held that this could entail the accession into NATO of the Central Eastern European Countries (CEEC) in a later phase. However, it became soon evident that a number of intertwined problems could hamper such a development. The Allies' main source of concern is the already mentioned risk of a Russian isolation, which could in turn ignite nationalist feelings within the country. Second, NATO expansion to the East would obviously mean a direct involvement of the organization in the area. If inter-ethnic and inter-state conflicts involving one of the newly annexed territories should erupt, NATO could run the risk of being dragged into those conflicts without having a clear policy on how to manage them. History has taught us with the dispute between Greece and Turkey that frictions among the Allies are NATO's major source of internal strain. Third -but this point is clearly related to the previous one- an expansion of its geographical scope and of its competencies could become a source of disputes among the Allies, reducing their ability to reach consensus, and thus eroding its internal cohesion. A final problem is connected with the effective operational capability, both technical and financial, of the military apparatuses of the various CEEC to integrate into the Alliance's military structure.

On the whole, it appeared evident that too rapid an enlargement of NATO would have endangered the organization, potentially reducing its effectiveness. At present, the path followed by the Allies seems to privilege options that do not consider a short-term enlargement of NATO, but are aimed at promoting a new security partnership with the Eastern European countries and with Russia.

This does not imply that the option of CEEC's integration in NATO has been completely discarded; rather, an «evolutionary» approach to the question has been privileged. NATO's engagement in Eastern Europe will be forged through the development of partnership links between NATO and each single country, while maintaining the multilateral cooperation in the NACC framework.

The NACC, opened to all the former Warsaw Pact states and to each republic of the former Soviet Union, was established as a forum of discussion of security-related issues. As a forum it has no operational capability, and cannot provide security guarantees that most the former Warsaw Pact countries were looking for.

With the US President Clinton proposal in January 1994 of a Partnership for Peace (PfP) plan, a further step towards integration has been made. The PfP is opened to all members of the NACC -and to all non-NATO European countries-, and it offers to the states that aspire to join NATO a means to prepare for membership. In practice, the partnership will permit to the forces

of non-NATO states to plan, train and exercise with NATO forces. The aim of the partnership is to favor a process that will eventually lead to a standardization of the new partners into the NATO model. Participation in the PfP will build the necessary skills for NATO membership, but it will not automatically lead to membership.

Despite the effort of compromise that lies behind the PfP proposal, the plan has not satisfied the expectations of the CEEC, neither soothed Russia's suspicious attitude. The PfP does not provide explicit security guarantees to the former; at the same time, it does not exclude the possibility of NATO expansion eastward feared by the latter.

3. This leads to another basic problem: so far, this new East-West dialogue has been developed on a multilateral basis. NATO's offer for political cooperation has been addressed indiscriminately, at the same time and on the same basis, to every former Warsaw Pact country, to the USSR and, after its dissolution, to every former Soviet republic. This means, for example, that the PfP is opened to a Central European country such as Poland, whose integration with the West has proceeded at a very rapid pace, as well as to the Central Asian Republics, comparatively far from Europe, where the processes of democratization and nation-building are definitely lagging behind.

As a matter of fact, the Eastern block is no longer a compact unity; the necessity to differentiate among the various countries is now evident. Some countries have already a stable democratic life, a remarkable degree of integration in the world markets, and a level of internal security that could satisfy Western standards. While the multilateral dialogue initiated by NATO with the East through the NACC and the PfP should in any case continue, a bilateral dialogue with some countries has also to be developed. This dialogue will necessarily foster an increasingly closer relation.

In the case of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and, to a certain extent, Slovakia, some form of association to NATO seems inevitable. This associated status may take a similar form to the status that the Western European Union (WEU) has already granted them. The four countries of the so-called Visegrad Group are also already associate members of the European Union. Their full entry in the European Union, warmly speeded up by Germany, is a development likely to occur in the next decade. If they become an integral part of the EU, the necessity to protect the Union territory might imply an extension of NATO security guarantees. An enlargement of NATO in that case could become the most natural option.

This leaves outside other Eastern countries, namely Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, which have also made remarkable progress along the path towards integration into the EU, but whose stabilization seems to proceed more slowly because of some internal as well as external factors. Whatever the outcome of NATO's developing links with the Visegrad countries will be, the same links will be sought at a later stage by those three countries.

Other former socialist countries must be considered with a totally different approach. In the case of the former Yugoslav states (with the manifest exception of Slovenia), NATO membership seems obviously a premature question, as they are directly involved in the ongoing Balkan conflict or strongly affected by it.

The possibility of Russia becoming a NATO member can be discarded for the time being, for its still unpredictable evolution makes full integration in the West a distant prospective. Other countries, namely the CIS countries and the Baltic states, are still strongly linked -both strategically and economically- to Russia. These links remain in most cases vital to the very existence of the CIS states, at least until their transition from the Soviet to the market economy will be completed. The Baltic states, despite their early assertion of independence, given their geographical position and the large Russian minority still living in their soil, should first manage to find effective solutions for the pending bilateral security problems with their powerful neighbor. This appears to be a pre-requisite for a closer integration in the Western security framework. Therefore, moves towards an integration of the CIS and of the Baltic states in NATO can be excluded in the foreseeable future.

4. In conclusion, the enlargement process of NATO should develop according to three main criteria.

Solidarity among the current NATO members remains a key factor. It has to be preserved if the alliance wants to retain not only its collective defence capabilities but also its overall stabilizing function. Indeed, far from being mutually exclusive, these two functions have to be seen as largely interconnected. It is therefore advisable that the alliance avoid any enlargement which could result in an erosion of its internal cohesion. This would be in particular the case if the enlargement should include countries which are highly unstable and whose commitment to democracy remains to be tested.

The four Visegrad countries are the most obvious candidates for full NATO membership. Given the remarkable level of stability of their political and economic systems they also seem to

be headed for an accession to the EU. A further step is the enlargement towards the other two EU associates -Bulgaria and Romania- and Slovenia, once they manage to solve the problems that have so far hindered their internal reform process and the stabilization of their external relations.

A key condition for this limited NATO enlargement eastward to take place is that the alliance strengthen its partnership links with the other Eastern countries. Of vital importance is, in particular, the continuation and enhancement of its cooperation with Russia. This can be realized through both the specific instruments NATO has already constructed to this end (NACC, PfP), and a reform of the security institutions with a wider membership, especially the United Nations, where Moscow enjoys a privileged status.