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GETTING NATO BACK TO BASICS

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Cold War ended, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been in the midst of an identity crisis. When it lost the Soviet threat in the early 1990s, the Atlantic alliance went on a search to redefine itself. There have been many stops on this inchoate journey of redefinition. The Bush Administration used NATO forces, structure, and *modus operandi* to build a framework for the coalition that defeated Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War. Since President Clinton took office, NATO has gone in even more directions. Between 1993 and 1995, NATO acted as a combat subcontractor for the United Nations in the former Yugoslavia, implementing and enforcing a "no-fly zone" over Bosnia and providing close air support to U.N. peacekeepers. Now, of course, NATO is involved in an ambitious peace enforcement operation in Bosnia: a mission for which NATO was not originally designed and in a country that is not a member of the Atlantic alliance.

NATO has traveled far from its original mission of deterring a Soviet attack on Western Europe. It stands to reason that it should do so, NATO planners maintain, because the original *raison d'être* of the alliance—the Soviet threat—has disappeared. What is needed, they argue, is to make NATO more up-to-date and more relevant to solving messy conflicts like Bosnia. Peacekeeping and "out-of-area" military operations (whereby NATO becomes involved in conflicts outside the treaty area) are supposed to save NATO from irrelevance. Unless NATO adapts to new circumstances, they aver, it will wither away and become extinct.

These advocates of a trendier NATO have it backwards. Unless NATO returns to its core mission, it will not survive. That mission is to preserve the freedom and security of Europe as a whole—to prevent the general conflagration of Europe—and not to put out every brushfire that breaks out in every corner of the continent. Put in the parlance of the strategist, NATO's core mission is to prevent the domination of Europe by a hostile power or bloc of powers which strive to deny the continent of its overall freedom and security.

That mission—preserving the basic security condition of Europe—is as relevant today as it was during the Cold War. Moreover, it is especially important in defining the American role in European security and NATO. The U.S. has a vital interest in the freedom and security of Europe regardless of whether a hostile attack is imminent. Who is to say whether Russia or some other country may or may not be a threat to Europe ten or twenty years

rity of Europe regardless of whether a hostile attack is imminent. Who is to say whether Russia or some other country may or may not be a threat to Europe ten or twenty years from now? It is not the immediacy of the threat that counts, but the depth of America's vital interest in the basic security condition of Europe. If even a potential threat to that interest exists, the U.S. must be prepared to deter major power aggression and defend European security and freedom. It makes no sense for America to leave Europe and return, as it did in the last two world wars, only when Europe is in flames and the threat is practically on America's doorstep. It is far better to keep 100,000 troops in Europe to maintain the peace than to send 1 million GIs to fight a European war that broke out in America's absence.

The more NATO drifts away from this core mission, the less likely it will survive in the long run. It will not work to create new roles and missions for which the alliance is poorly suited and in which the U.S. is reluctant to become involved. Military make-work will cause the interests of alliance members to diverge and will accelerate the demise of the alliance. If peacekeeping and other crisis management operations take NATO too far afield of its core mission, the cohesion of the alliance will be diluted and the U.S. will lose interest over time. Getting NATO involved in "out-of-area" operations for their own sake will not do the trick either. Having a baby to save the marriage is neither good family practice nor a sound basis for military strategy.

NATO needs to get back to basics. It needs to refocus on its core mission of ensuring that peace and freedom in Europe as a whole are not threatened by a hostile power. The greatest threat to NATO's cohesion today is the possibility of failure in Bosnia.[1] No other issue has such a potential to tear NATO apart—not the debate over NATO enlargement or disagreements about how to handle the Russians. If NATO trips up today, it will not be over a disagreement concerning its core mission, but over some tangential but seemingly urgent problem (like Bosnia) which Europeans and Americans mistook as being fundamentally and strategically important to the security and freedom of Europe as a whole.

Why NATO?

NATO countries need to explain to their peoples why NATO is needed regardless of what happens in Bosnia. American leaders in particular need not only to articulate more clearly to a skeptical public why NATO should exist, but also to establish clearer principles for when the U.S. should or should not become involved in Europe's wars. In addition, leaders should make an effort to define how America will become involved in other European security affairs. This will promote a clearer and more sensible division of labor that can be understood by Americans and Europeans. Accomplishing these tasks would give NATO direction and purpose. There are three reasons why NATO should exist.

Reason #1: NATO is needed as insurance to maintain the freedom and security of Europe. This is vitally important to the freedom and security of the United States. A Europe dominated by any power hostile to America, her interests, and her values would be a direct threat to the security, stability, and prosperity of the United States itself. America fought two world wars and sustained over 40 years of a Cold War military com-

1 See Thomas Moore and John Hillen, "Clinton's Bosnia venture Threatens What It Is Supposed to Uphold—The Atlantic Alliance," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder Update* No. 267, December 15, 1995.

mitment to prevent Europe's domination. It should be no less committed to this goal today, even though the immediacy of the threat has diminished.

NATO is a strategic insurance policy. Insurance exists to protect against catastrophe, no matter how remote the threat may be. Because the cost of catastrophe is so high, people are willing to pay insurance premiums to protect them in case it strikes. Even when the likelihood of a household fire is remote, most people still take out fire insurance because the cost of a fire is so devastating, and far greater than the cost of the premiums.

So it is with NATO. The threat today in Europe is not as great as it once was, but neither are the premiums. One hundred thousand troops deployed in Europe today is far more economical, both in blood and treasure, than the cost a world war would impose on America tomorrow. Twice this century, Americans have seen what happens when fire sweeps over Europe. Anything that would prevent such a catastrophe would be well worth the price. Indeed, for this reason, NATO is even better than insurance. It actually helps to prevent catastrophe. That makes it a double bargain.

Reason #2: NATO is needed to provide general economic and political stability in Europe, which is vitally important to the U.S. economy. A major power threat to Europe would cause economic disruption that would be devastating to U.S. markets and economic stability. The U.S. economy is greatly dependent on the economic stability of America's principal trading partners, and access to trade and resources in Europe is a vital American interest. Europe is America's second largest trading region and accounts for billions of dollars in two-way trade per year. Many millions of jobs in the United States are directly dependent upon American trade with Europe and European investment in the U.S. The prosperity of America depends in large measure on a free and prosperous Europe.

Reason #3: NATO is an important vehicle for consolidating and spreading freedom and democracy in Europe. While NATO ultimately is an alliance of collective defense, it also is a functional vehicle for promoting democracy and freedom in Europe. It is not only practically important from the standpoint of providing stability in Europe, but it has a moral component as well. NATO is an organization of democratic states and a reflection of America's identity in the world, an anchor for American values both abroad and at home. This stability, born of political freedom and economic prosperity, should be brought by NATO to Central Europe, a region historically characterized by political instability.

When Should America Become Involved?

It is not enough to know that America should remain in the NATO alliance. The far more pressing problem is to know when and under what circumstances U.S. combat troops should or should not become involved in a range of military operations in Europe. In order to have a coherent strategy and promote a sensible division of labor in Europe, the U.S. should adhere to some basic guidelines.

Guideline #1: America's principal military role is to serve NATO's core mission of collective defense. The main mission of the U.S. armed forces in Europe should be to prevent Europe from falling victim to a hostile hegemonic power. Thus, America's main military mission is collective defense—to protect NATO member states from a major power threat. While the U.S. should never rule out participation in less threatening sce-

narios or turn its back on out-of-area operations, in general it should concentrate its military efforts on achieving NATO's core military mission. This will lend definition and purpose to NATO and the American role.

Guideline #2: U.S. forces must make a unique contribution to the military operation. As a rule, if U.S. forces duplicate the efforts of European allies that can provide the same capabilities, the European forces should get the nod. The United States is NATO's military leader because of its unique and powerful military capabilities. It is not just another European military power; it is a world power with many strategic commitments. A significant U.S. military role in NATO must be guided by the singular capabilities that America can bring to bear.

Guideline #3: The U.S. force contribution should be decisive. The use of large numbers of American combat forces should make the difference between winning and losing or drawing. If the American people perceive an American-led NATO chasing peripheral security crises with the reluctant participation of prosperous European allies, public support for NATO will erode quickly. The U.S. military role in NATO must be a unique and decisive contribution towards the core mission of the alliance.

Enlarging NATO.

Expanding the Atlantic alliance to include Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia would enhance NATO's capability to perform its core mission of defending the basic security condition of Europe. The profound geopolitical security and stability this will bring to Central Europe far outweighs the technical and financial difficulties of limited enlargement. To do this, the Clinton Administration must stop dragging its feet. Clinton has taken the exclusive counsel of his fears and has given too much weight to complaints from Russians who oppose NATO enlargement. The President has given Russia a *de facto* veto and has used the Partnership for Peace plan as little more than a bureaucratic delaying tactic. Clinton needs to act now by making a political commitment to these four Central European states and demonstrating the same kind of vision and courage that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President George Bush showed in pressing for German unification in the face of Soviet opposition.

A NATO Revitalization Act. To spur the President to revitalize NATO, the Congress needs to act. The Clinton Administration has not done a good job of giving NATO a sense of purpose and mission in the post-Cold War era. The Congress should consider passing a NATO Revitalization Act that not only spells out the reasons for the American people about why the U.S. should be involved in NATO, but also clearly defines the strategic role of the U.S. in fulfilling NATO's core mission of collective defense. This Act also should define the principles governing U.S. military participation in NATO, thereby urging the Europeans to take more responsibility for peacekeeping and other marginal military missions. Finally, it should call expressly for the rapid inclusion of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia in NATO and substantial modification of the Clinton Administration's Partnership for Peace program.

NATO'S IDENTITY CRISIS

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has proven to be the most effective security alliance of modern times. Its stated aim was to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of [its] peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The treaty signatories also sought to "promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area" and were "resolved to unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security."[2] That NATO achieved these goals with small loss of life in the face of an adversarial and expansionist Soviet Union was truly remarkable. Underpinning this success story was the enormous and expensive political and military commitment made by America to NATO, a commitment that did not waver during the many crises of the Cold War.

It is the ironic fate of alliances that their success ultimately can spell the end of their existence. Such is the case with NATO, where the moment of the alliance's greatest triumph contained within it the seeds of the identity crisis that now threatens its viability and even its existence. The demise of the Soviet Union brought calls for a "peace dividend" the world over. Politicians and strategists proposed a restructuring of alliance commitments, defense requirements, and security architecture to meet the more unpredictable but less apocalyptic threats of the new world disorder. The American public demanded that its politicians focus on troubles at home. The 1992 presidential campaign was about "the economy, stupid," and foreign policy issues dropped out of the immediate consciousness of America.[3]

In the meantime, NATO has struggled for a post-Soviet identity that can inspire its members to remain completely committed. It is still not clear that this can be accomplished in the absence of a clear and present danger that would cause the interests of all NATO members to converge. Consequently, the struggle to find a new identity for the alliance has been marked by an inchoate and inclusive program of NATO enlargement (further muddled by the Partnership for Peace program), a dabbling in combat support to U.N. peacekeeping, a proposal to refocus NATO on the Mediterranean and the implicit threat of nationalist Islam, and the out-of-area peace enforcement operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

None of these operations has served to inspire solid support for NATO from the American public and Congress. While a majority of Americans (56 percent) support America's basic commitment to the alliance, public support for the American role in NATO's Bosnian intervention has peaked at around 40 percent.[4] In addition, while support for NATO is stable in Congress, the Bosnian mission has met strong congressional opposition in both the House and Senate. Many congressional leaders question the utility of an American-led alliance that created a supposedly vital American interest in Bosnia, an area of marginal strategic interest for the United States. Indeed, President Clinton used American leadership and credibility in NATO as the chief justification for the American role in Bosnia. NATO became the end in itself, no longer an appropriate means to the relative end of preventing a major power threat to Europe.

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2 Preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington. D.C., April 4, 1949.

3 For the most comprehensive study of these shifts in public opinion, see the 1995 Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey, *American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, pp. 9-12.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 35, and polling by Louis Harris and Associates, December 5, 1995, and *New York Times*/CBS, December 14, 1995.

THE NEED FOR A WORKABLE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE

The United States needs alliances of all sorts in an interdependent world. Economic alliances allow the U.S. to remain the number one trading nation in the world and sustain American prosperity at home. Political alliances ensure that America is involved in decisions the world over that may influence the peace and prosperity of the United States. Military alliances give America partners in fighting her enemies and defending her interests, thereby lessening the costs to the U.S. in time of war and peace.

The U.S. has many national interests throughout the world, but not all are equally important. The principal task of American statecraft is to discriminate among these interests, set strategic priorities, and choose policy options commensurate with their importance. Such an approach distinguishes among vital national interests, important interests, and marginal interests.[5] Naturally, America has a vital national interest in defending the physical territory and airspace of the United States and ensuring the safety and well-being of Americans abroad. To protect these vital interests, the U.S. should be willing to wage war if necessary.

In addition, the U.S. has vital national interests that lie beyond American shores. For both political and economic reasons, it is in America's vital national interest that Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf are not dominated by a hegemonic power or bloc of powers. It is also in America's vital national interest that the U.S. have unimpeded access to foreign trade and natural resources. American prosperity overwhelmingly depends on the stability of international markets and free trade regimes. Political scientist Benjamin Schwarz has written that:

> Economic interdependence dictates security commitments. As long as world politics remain what they have always been, Europe and East Asia will be potentially unstable. And as long as U.S. prosperity is understood to depend upon the stability of those regions, the United States must pacify them. America's worldwide security commitments are a truly permanent burden.[6]

However, Schwarz and many others also recognize that this permanent burden ultimately could turn into a "wasting proposition." America, without a coherent strategy, and in order to sustain its prosperity, will run itself ragged trying to preserve the stability of the entire world. Its engagement in world affairs therefore must be selective. The U.S. must set clear priorities that allow it to use its political capital and military forces for the tasks that most matter to America. If the U.S. tries to do everything, it will overextend itself and accomplish nothing.[7]

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5 See Kim R. Holmes, ed., *A Safe and Prosperous America: A U.S. Foreign Policy and Defense Blueprint*, 2d Edition (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1994).

6 Benjamin C. Schwarz, "The Arcana of Empire and the Dilemma of American National Security," *Salmagundi*, Winter-Spring 1994, p. 195.

7 In doing so, it could become, in the words of Professor Ronald Steel, "A strange kind of superpower, with chronic deficits, weak currency, massive borrowing, and immense debt." Ronald Steel, *Temptations of a Superpower* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 5.

In order to avoid becoming the world's policeman, the U.S. must operate within security alliances. These alliances must preserve the conditions necessary for American prosperity, and must do so by "stretching" American resources through an intelligent definition of America's exact role and principles for sharing burdens with allies. These alliances must unequivocally lay out the roles that make the most sense for America and her goals abroad. NATO, in particular, needs to be refocused to avoid being drawn into an expensive "wasting proposition" that the American people will not support.

WHY NATO?

Most military alliances in the world can only hope to attain the level of political and military credibility enjoyed by NATO. However, in order for NATO to sustain public and congressional support in the U.S., its fundamental purpose must be refocused. American leaders should explain exactly why NATO is critical and should define America's basic role in the alliance.

There are three principal reasons why the U.S. should be a member of NATO.

Reason #1: NATO is needed as insurance to maintain the freedom and security of Europe. The U.S. has been a major European power throughout the 20th century, intervening in three world wars (two hot and one cold) to prevent a hostile power or bloc of powers from dominating the continent. An American commitment to this basic security condition of Europe is an insurance policy that works to prevent another great power war in Europe. The premiums that America pays on this policy are commensurate with the benefits. A focused and clearly defined policy will ensure this balance is retained. In fact, the costs of these premiums have dropped tremendously since the end of the Cold War. In 1989, the United States military had over 313,000 servicemembers permanently stationed in Europe. That number is now down to 100,000.[8]

As with any insurance policy, the cost of being insured through NATO is far less than the cost of not being insured at all. A major power threat to the political freedom of the European continent was the condition that inevitably drew the U.S. into the enormously expensive campaigns of World Wars I and II and the Cold War. It is far better to have 100,000 troops peaceably deployed in Europe now than have to commit a million later to fight a war that broke out in the absence of the one power that could guarantee the core security condition of Europe: Less expensive to live as lodgers now than as liberators later. Even the most superficial and cursory look at modern history supports this view.

Reason #2: NATO is needed to provide general economic and political stability in Europe, which is vitally important to the U.S. economy. A U.S. commitment to the collective defense of Europe is necessary to preserve the economic prosperity of America. The system of international trade upon which American prosperity depends is predicated on free, stable, and orderly political conditions. In 1993, Europe was America's second largest customer, taking 31 percent of American exports. It also was the U.S.'s

8 International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1989-90* and *The Military Balance 1995-6*, Brassey's (UK) and Oxford University Press, p. 25 and p. 30.

TOWARD A REVITALIZED NATO

The Clinton Administration has failed to develop a sound strategy for NATO. Lacking a practical vision for America's role in Europe, President Clinton has taken the alliance in dangerous directions. If the present course is not changed, it could threaten the survival of the alliance. To give NATO badly needed focus in the post-Cold War era, Congress needs to step into the breach opened by the President's failure to articulate a coherent NATO strategy. Congress should consider, as an amendment to the FY 1997 Defense authorization bill, a NATO Revitalization Act that:

1. **Spells out** America's vital national interests in Europe, explains the reasons for America's participation in NATO and the U.S. strategic role, and states that NATO is a political insurance policy that ensures Europe will not be dominated by a hostile power or bloc of powers;
2. **Defines** the principles governing U.S. military participation in NATO, states that any significant American combat force commitment to a NATO operation must be firmly grounded in NATO's core mission of collective defense, and recognizes that U.S. forces must make a unique and decisive contribution to NATO military action;
3. **Encourages** the Europeans to take lead roles in addressing marginal and peripheral security problems while guaranteeing an active U.S. support role in these endeavors;
4. **Offers** immediate NATO membership to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia and drops the implicit guarantee of membership for other countries in the Partnership for Peace program.

CONCLUSION

NATO is an American alliance. It is a tool that America needs to defend its vital national interests in Europe. It does not need charity work in the form of attempting to reinvent itself as a pan-European alliance of collective security. NATO protects the political freedom and economic prosperity of the United States, and serves as an effective means to this end.

NATO needs to get back to basics. In the absence of a clear and present danger to Europe, it has lost its focus. It has tried to become relevant by embarking on military make-work programs for the United Nations, and now on its own behalf. These diffuse efforts have diluted NATO's cohesion and caused U.S. public support for the alliance to erode.

A NATO Revitalization Act will refocus the alliance and preserve American support for the U.S. role in Europe. It will enhance this support by laying out principles guiding U.S. military action in NATO. These criteria will serve to put forth a clearly understood and sensible division of labor in NATO that will keep the alliance strong. This strong, cohesive, and focused NATO must undertake limited enlargement to extend the zone of peace, security, and freedom to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. This will enhance NATO as an alliance of collective defense. Forestalling enlargement and failing to refocus NATO will, at best, turn the alliance into an incohesive and emasculated collective security organization that bears no resemblance to its robust predecessor.

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