

RUSH!

Number

4/10/97

474

SUNK IN HELSINKI: NATO AFTER THE SUMMIT

While Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin both proclaimed victory in their recent Helsinki summit, the NATO alliance may have been the loser. In fact, the future of NATO as the military alliance through which the United States protects its vital interests in Europe was greatly undermined by the Helsinki summit. U.S. negotiators made three major errors that needlessly weakened American and NATO security.

- **President Clinton wasted an opportunity to re-assert the identity of NATO as a U.S.-led military alliance of collective defense.** This was an ideal opportunity to explain why NATO is important to the United States and Europe, why the United States will stay involved as NATO's leader, and why enlargement forms a critical part of that vision. Instead, the Administration negotiators accepted the Russian view of NATO's evolution into an all-encompassing and largely emasculated collective security grouping that will be dedicated increasingly to peacekeeping and other smaller military operations.
- **The Administration offered ambiguously worded promises about Russia's consultative role in the "new" NATO.** Three new initiatives would give Russia a voice in NATO decision making that would put Moscow in a position to disrupt and dilute the rapid consensus-building that has made NATO history's most durable alliance.
- **The Clinton team offered a series of concessions on five separate arms control agreements.**

Defining NATO. The United States is involved in European security as NATO's leader mainly to ensure that Europe's freedom is not threatened by a major power or bloc of hostile powers. With no major power poised to threaten Europe, the United States has reduced its European-based forces from over 344,000 in 1990 to around 100,000 in 1997. The temporary absence of a clear and present threat, however, does not remove the enduring nature of the vital U.S. interest in Europe. The U.S. commitment to European security through NATO should be thought of as insurance against future threats. The enlargement of NATO to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic is part of the profound U.S. commitment to the defense of Western and Central Europe. The United States is enlarging NATO to enhance the mission of defending vital interests in Europe, at the same time bringing security to an area of Europe long wracked by war and brutal conquest.

Unfortunately, none of this was made clear by President Clinton during the summit. The Administration team apparently thought that an enlargement in size must necessarily be accompanied by an enlargement in the scope and activity of NATO—transforming it from a focused and cohesive alliance of collective defense to a large, diffuse alliance of collective security. Turning NATO into a watered-down "talk shop" was long a Soviet ambition during the Cold War, during which on at least three

occasions in the 1950s and 1960s Soviet diplomats called for NATO and the Warsaw Pact to be replaced by a pan-European system of collective security. Russian negotiators at Helsinki in 1997, with similar geopolitical goals, found the Clinton Administration a willing partner in trying to “Find-landize” NATO for the future.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright articulated the Administration’s vision of NATO that would put the Alliance on the road to recreation as a political grouping not dissimilar to the quintessential collective security association: the 50-plus member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Briefing the press in Helsinki, Secretary Albright strongly insisted that the process of NATO enlargement was “not going to be part of creating any new artificial dividing lines in Europe.” This view represents a colossal misunderstanding of NATO. A military alliance entails a solemn commitment to defend the territory of member states. The obligation of NATO members to defend other members from attack is all about “lines” between states. Without a territorial demarcation of NATO’s membership, the defense guarantee established by Article V of the NATO treaty is a sham. Far from being “artificial,” the lines of NATO’s membership are the absolute core of the Alliance. The desire to rid Europe of these distinctions is clear evidence that the Administration’s support of enlargement rests on the hopes that NATO will transform itself into a slightly improved OSCE.

The Russian Role in a “New” NATO. To advance this transformation, the Administration proposed that Russia be given a greater role in NATO’s decision-making process. Clinton proposed a non-binding charter between Russia and NATO that would spell out the relationship between an enlarged NATO, Russia, and the “have-not” states in-between the two. The idea of a charter is not necessarily a bad one, but the Clinton Administration’s proposals to add an Atlantic Partnership Council and a NATO–Russia Joint Council at NATO headquarters will ensure that an already highly bureaucratized NATO cannot act with the consensus and cohesion that have made it so successful in the past. Such a role for Russia in NATO will make it possible for a decision taken by one NATO council in the morning to be watered-down, confused, or stalled in different afternoon councils by a Russia that does not accept the legitimacy of the alliance. Moreover, the proposed formation of a permanent joint NATO–Russia peacekeeping brigade, which has worked well in Bosnia as an ad-hoc creation, is further evidence of what Henry Kissinger called the “Helsinki blueprint [that] moves NATO from being an alliance toward a system of collective security.”

Columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that President Clinton went into the summit with the goal of paying Russia “to pretend that NATO expansion is something other than what it is.” Unfortunately, the Administration apparently believes that NATO should be something different than what it really is. It believes NATO enlargement is ultimately about expanding a club of democratic, free market states that will cooperate in the future on peacekeeping and small missions. These, however, are not the alpha and omega of NATO; they are the byproducts of a stable Europe whose freedom is guaranteed by a credible, focused, and cohesive military alliance of collective defense. Ultimately, NATO is about undertaking a serious commitment to the territorial defense of a member state. The only way to ensure the democratic prosperity of Europe is to be forthright about this U.S. commitment in the first place.

Not only has the Administration sold a new and enlarged NATO to Russia in the guise of a weak collective security group, it has ensured that Russia will have a powerful voice in NATO’s inner councils to make sure this is what NATO becomes. Before concluding any agreements with Russia on its relationship to or role in NATO, the Clinton Administration should be forthright about the purpose of an enlarged NATO. It is not to create a new diplomatic or quasi-military association dedicated to peacekeeping or other small missions. Rather, NATO represents a military commitment to the collective defense of Western and Central Europe that cannot be credibly maintained if Russia—a country opposed to the very legitimacy of the alliance—is given such a strong voice in determining the future direction of NATO.

John Hillen
Policy Analyst