

DISQUIETUDE ON THE EASTERN FLANK: AWAITING ALLIANCE RESPONSE

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Abstract. **: *The absence of significant and tangible military defensive infrastructure on the Eastern flank generated over time a breach of credibility in the security guarantee provided by NATO under its Article 5 commitment. The main argument of the countries in the New Europe now is that, in order to be credible enough, and not just a paper guarantee, a collective defence commitment must be backed by “boots on the ground” and by military tangible logistics. While assuming this perspective, the present article looks at some of the alarm signals coming from the countries on NATO’s Eastern flank, trying to explain the feeling of insecurity perceived by the states in the region as well as the options available to the Euro-Atlantic community in order to engage in a much-needed process of strategic reassurance.*

Keywords: *NATO, Central and Eastern Europe, strategic reassurance, European Security and Defence Policy, Sikorski doctrine, Article 5 commitment, collective defence.*

Introduction

Is the NATO Eastern flank in danger? This question currently haunts, in quite a timely fashion, the countries of the “New Europe”. The interrogation became evident on several occasions which outline, on the one hand, the framework of the debate and the conceptual challenges ahead, and, on the other hand, the collective worries of the states in the region. In this local concert of voices arguing insecurity, Poland seems to have taken the lead.

On July 7th, in Brussels, internal debate was launched within NATO with

the purpose of crafting a New Strategic Concept for the most successful alliance in history. At that time, the NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, was pointing out that in his opinion, one of the most pressing issues to be dealt with would be that of reassuring “the new Allies that NATO takes its Article 5 collective defence commitment seriously; not just on paper”¹.

While strategists realized that the document that will codify the strategic vision and rationale of NATO in the post 9/11 world will have to bear elements of reassurance, an impressive collection of former presidents and ministers from

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¹ Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO Secretary General, Speech in Bratislava, 17 July 2009, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_56487.htm

the states of the New Europe voiced out their concern in an open letter addressed to the Obama administration on July 17th. The Euro-Atlantic decision-makers generation that supported the opening-up of NATO's security umbrella over Central and Eastern Europe back in the 1990s called for the understanding that "NATO needs to make the Alliance's commitments credible and provide strategic reassurance to all members"².

The underlying basic premise of the ones that fear seems to be that the Article 5 musketeer commitment of the North Atlantic Treaty is not credible enough. In response, the strategists always voice the need for keeping the engagement. In September 2008, in the context of the Russian invasion in Georgia, the US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, translated this into NATO language: "in the case of NATO, Article 5 must mean what it says"³. Nevertheless, this is perceived as soft rhetoric in capitals across the Eastern flank of the Alliance, and especially in Warsaw, where Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski sounded the alarm bells in the global public square in November 2008, emphasizing the credibility gap that the Alliance faces along its Eastern dimension and the absolute imperative to restore credibility to the NATO guarantee⁴.

The Reasons behind the Fear

The Baltic States together with the NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe are currently experiencing a growing feeling of "nervousness" as regards their state of security. While their belonging to the Alliance makes the traditional security pledges explicit, the sources of the insecurity perceived along the string of countries that make up NATO's Eastern flank relate to a lack of substantiation of these very pledges, by reference to hardpower. On the long run, the lack of substantiation gnaws at the very credibility of the Alliance. The substantiation of the security guarantees is understood by the states in the region in a very pure and down-to-earth way: empty promises and a cumbersome Alliance won't soothe security concerns, whereas capabilities and contingency planning, together with sound logistics, will.

The confidence crisis built up in time in the countries of the New Europe is also a by-product of a certain defence posture adopted by the Alliance. Designed initially as a political and military mechanism, especially after the first enlargement round, the Alliance became at its core more and more a political machine and less and less a military functional architecture prepared to respond to a crisis; in the words of Ronald Asmus-the main architect of the NATO re-invention

² "An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15 July 2009 http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,6825987,An_Open_Letter_to_the_Obama_Administration_from_Central.html

³ Robert Gates quoted in "Gates Urges Restraint, Resolve for NATO", US Department of Defence News, 19 September 2008, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=51250>

⁴ Radosław Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, "The Barack Obama Promise: A European View", Address at The Atlantic Council Washington, 19 November 2008, available at <http://www.msz.gov.pl/index.php?document=23143>

in the 1990s, “the power of Article 5 was never simply the words on paper. It was always the fact that this commitment were backed up by planning, exercises and boots on the ground”. It is precisely that sense of “we”-ness – an integrated organizational culture of acting together through collective war-gaming exercises – that seems to be missing in recent years.

These fundamental questions were also raised during the NATO summit in Bucharest, in April 2008, by Radolsaw Sikorski, the Polish Defense Minister at the time: “Do we want to be a worthwhile political club? Or do we want to be a hardcore military alliance in which not just the international staff, but thousands of our officers know one another and have gelled into a collective culture?”. Not only that there are no prudent defence plans active today for the new members of the Alliance, but the old pledge of the mid 1990s, that the Alliance would create an Article 5 reinforcement capability that could be deployed in times of crisis, never became reality.

In the post Russian-Georgian war security environment, at a time when the Alliance ought to have dramatically changed its defence posture towards the Eastern flank, NATO has chosen to do quasi-nothing. For most of the Eastern NATO members the Russian invasion of Georgia was a “game changer. These countries needed reassurance as regards the credibility of the Article 5 commitment, not only words, but some real, tangible evidence that the political will behind the collective defence pledge can finally be translated into “boots on the ground”. In that context, the only way to receive US boots on the ground in Central Europe was to accept the US proposal of deploying a

missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, plus the promise from Washington that it will deploy a Patriot battery system on Polish territory in order to consolidate its deterrence capacity.

The roots of all security dilemmas are in the states’ own back yard. That is to say, the countries in the region find it difficult to reconcile the current strategic perspective of the Alliance, whose core is deployment in expeditionary missions, with their perception that the Alliance should concentrate more on protecting their homeland. This idea was formulated by Radoslaw Sikorski in terms of the relationship that exists between being a security supplier and a security consumer, namely that the states in the region will be more readily available to embark upon out-of-area Alliance missions if they receive strategic reassurance that their home territory is protected.

The catalyst for this perspective was the Russian invasion in Georgia in August 2008. When Russia went breaking international commitments and norms for the dire justification of protecting one’s citizens and the Atlantic community failed to respond, an alarm signal was drawn all along the Eastern flank of the Alliance. If Georgia, then why not Ukraine, “a swing country for the balance of power on the Eurasian landmass”- as Sikorski called it. The explanation for the failure to help Georgia, as identified by those who fear, lies with poor Alliance logistics, which is in its turn one of the underlying causes for the loss of NATO credibility. The possibility that the scenario might repeat makes the events in Georgia a turning point, a “game-changer” for the Baltic States and the NATO

members in Central and Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, the trend within the Alliance, especially in the Old Europe, is to ignore this fact, codified in the so-called "Sikorski doctrine". Advertised as "a doctrine for a doctrine" (i.e. a response to the Medvedev doctrine), this principle puts forward a way out of the conundrum: the whole Atlantic community is urged to interpret any further attempt at re-drawing the borders in Europe, either by force or by subversion, as a threat to its security that entails a proportional response.

Russia's assertiveness makes for a good enough reason for concern. As the CEE signatories of the open letter to the Obama administration notice, while NATO is now weaker than it was in the 1990s, Russia is acting out a power duality: globally, a status-quo power, regionally, "a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods"⁵. While the administration in Washington seeks the cooperation of the former, the states that make up NATO's Eastern flank find themselves face to face with the latter: the Russia that in 2007 withdrew Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, that invaded Georgia in 2008, that makes Europe a subject to its energy blackmail. It is against this backdrop that the Obama administration seeks détente, without trying to eliminate first the security dilemmas of the states in the region.

Offering strategic reassurance for the states on the NATO Eastern flank is not chief among the Obama

administration's priorities. This is something that the countries of the region understand, especially if one puts things into perspective: the priorities in Washington are centred on complex dossiers, such as Iran or North Korea, that specifically require Russian input. Under such circumstances, the Obama administration has been tightrope-walking in the debate concerning the missile defence shield, and it is generally difficult to believe that it will undertake any actions that might be interpreted as irksome in Moscow, while pleas are on within NATO for the Alliance to return to "business as usual" in its relationship with Russia.

To put it in a nutshell, assuming for a moment that we are in the Old Town Market Place in Warsaw, the question is, what do we see? An overstretched Alliance that tends to devote its resources primarily to expeditionary missions, without being interested in securing the treaty homeland area, an Old Europe and an Obama administration increasingly willing to kick off again "business as usual" with Russia, an America with an overstrained power portfolio and an increasingly weaker hand in a multipolar setting that commits its resources primarily to the management of Iraq and Afghanistan. How could NATO expect Warsaw to feel secure in a traditionally insecure region, when the alliance has no military infrastructure, no proper logistics, no adequate defence and contingency planning for the Eastern frontier?

⁵ "An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15 July 2009, available at http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,6825987,An_Open_Letter_to_the_Obama_Administration_from_Central.html

An Alternative to the Alliance: between solid European security guarantees and US missile defence

While the term “alternative” is improper in the context - given the assumed complementarity of the security guarantees-, it nevertheless accurately describes the manner in which the states on the Eastern flank understand to allay their security concerns. Looking towards the US for additional security guarantees can be interpreted only as a natural consequence to the fact that NATO credibility is fading away whereas EU security guarantees are still in their infancy.

More than anything, the unrest of the CEE states points to a severe lack of trust in any security guarantees that the European Union might provide, or more specifically, that the Old Europe might assume. From a normative point of view, this perspective is not justified; however, in terms of political will as well as of amount in defence spending, Warsaw and Prague seem to be essentially right in dialling 911 instead of calling Brussels.

The idea that the European Union should provide a security guarantee to

its members has been present on the European agenda ever since the 1950s. In theory, the wording of Article V of the Modified Brussels Treaty⁶ provides for a much more powerful collective defence clause than that envisaged by the Article 5 in the Washington Treaty⁷, even more so since the former Article V precedes the latter. Nevertheless, during the Cold War years, it was NATO which took the lead in providing security for Europe. Starting with the 1990s, the EU treaties provide for the coming into existence of a “common Union defence policy”, which “will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides”⁸, while the Lisbon Treaty, if ratified by all Member States, envisages some elements of novelty in terms of European collective defence. The Treaty introduces a mutual defence clause which reads that “if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter [...]”⁹ together with a second solidarity clause, related to Member States assisting

⁶ The Brussels Treaty (signed in 1948), amended by the Paris Agreements (signed in 1954), Article V: “If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, *the other High Contracting Parties* will, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, *afford the Party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power.*”, available at <http://www.weu.int/Treaty.htm>

⁷ The North Atlantic Treaty (signed in 1949), Article 5: “*The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all* and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them [...] will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm

⁸ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (2008), Section 2, Article 42, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:115:SOM:EN:HTML>

⁹ Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, (signed in 2007), Article 28 A (7), available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:0010:0041:EN:PDF>

each other in cases of terrorist attacks or natural or man-made disasters. The clauses, the wording of which seems solid enough, are to be corroborated with the mechanisms of “reinforced cooperation” and “permanent structured cooperation”, new instruments meant to turn the EU, through the ESDP, into a genuine global actor.

And while the legal and the institutional adaptation seem to be underway, the major drawback – perceived as such on the Eastern flank – is that the normative provisions have to be backed by political will. Up to now, Old Europe has failed to invest the amount of political will necessary in order to adopt the appropriate defence posture that would not only send the right message to any 21st century aggressor but would also correct the trust deficit of the Eastern flank. Learning from the experience of the Alliance so far, the EU has to understand that “it was never the words on paper that by themselves gave Article 5 its power. If it was, then the language of the old WEU treaty would have been more important than the similar clause in NATO because that language is even stronger. What gave those words meaning was that they were backed by political will as expressed through the means and mechanisms to actually come to each other’s defence. And it is the lack thereof that helps explain the problem we have today”¹⁰.

In its turn, political will translates into defence spending. Currently, the amount of defence spending at the EU level is approximately one half of the US budget dedicated to military expenditure. In addition to this, due to the fact that the ESDP is to a large degree intergovernmental in nature, the greater part of the expenditure related to the missions undertaken is supported by the countries which provide troops on the ground, i.e. take the greatest risk, which is hardly a way to demonstrate European solidarity.¹¹ Therefore, there is no surprise that there appear voices who argue that “nobody takes Old Europe seriously from the military point of view. Germany’s military spending is of a trifling amount. In Washington, Republicans, Democrats, Neoconservatives and Wilsonians alike don’t seem to give the defence engagements assumed by the Old Europe much credit. Plus, the budgetary constraints coming as a result of the crisis will curb military spending even more in countries like the UK and Germany and, by consequence, they will also curb NATO operational potential. [...] Under such conditions, the only option for the Eastern flank is to contemplate the US security guarantees. The only ones that matter.”¹²

It is thus understandable why the revision of the missile defence proposal by the Obama administration generated a significant crisis of confidence in the

¹⁰ Ronald Asmus, Executive Director German Marshall Fund of the United States, interview with Octavian Manea, “Flancul estic fara scutul antiracheta”, *Revista 22*, No. 42, 13-19 October 2009, available at <http://www.revista22.ro/flancul-estic-f259r259-scutul-antirachet259-6752.html>

¹¹ Alvaro de Vasconcelos, Editor, “What ambitions for European defence in 2020?”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, October 2009, p. 76, available at http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/What_ambitions_for_European_defence_in_2020.pdf

¹² John Hulsman, Expert in Transatlantic issues, interview with Octavian Manea, “Un deficit de incredere in Vechea Europa”, *Revista 22*, No. 44, 27 October- 2 November, available at <http://www.revista22.ro/biden-reasigur259-flancul-estic-6863.html>

Eastern flank's capitals, especially in Warsaw and Prague. The political elites in the region, who invested a tremendous amount of political capital in pushing the missile defence proposal high on the national and European agenda, now fear that the Americans are not as committed to the security of this geopolitically sensitive and vulnerable part of Europe as they used to be. To a certain extent, the debate surrounding the Obama policy reversal regarding the missile defence had the virtue of clarifying the core security stakes: what really mattered for East Europeans was hardly the shield *per se*, but the informal security guarantees provided by the presence of the US facilities in this part of Europe - an uncomfortable and inconvenient truth that has been there for more than a decade or so: "Poles and Czechs favoured the American bases only because they would bring American troops to their territory. But they favour American troops on their territory only because two successive American presidents have refused to invest in NATO's presence in Central Europe".¹³

What should be done?

A rapid-reaction Alliance is needed. In the words of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, "Poland and Poles do not want to be in alliances in which assistance comes at some point later-it is no good when assistance comes to dead

people. Poland wants to be in alliances where assistance comes in the very first hours of any possible conflict"¹⁴. NATO's inertial organizational culture, the fact that it usually takes "days, weeks to start that machinery", is what made Poland for instance to go looking for additional security guarantees and sign a mutual defence commitment with the US, in addition to having signed the missile defence agreement, which is basically a mutual assistance clause that provides that the two countries will come to each other's aid in case of danger. This particular mutual defence commitment between Poland and the US, complementary to the NATO's Article 5, should send a very clear message that the alliance is not doing enough in order to secure the countries on the Eastern flank. Moreover, it sets a very dangerous precedent for an alliance presumed to be in the business of injecting a geopolitical sense of territorial and homeland security to all members, because NATO is heading towards a two-tiered membership: those who feel secure and are willing to transform their forces in order to take up an expeditionary operational posture, and those who feel less secure and are more interested in a static territorial defence posture.

As Radek Sikorski put it, the time has come for NATO to recover "its traditional role as a military organization, and once again devote a portion of its energy to the treaty area"¹⁵. We need to get to basics. An Alliance paralyzed by

¹³ Anne Applebaum, "Letting Europe Drift", Washington Post, 22 September 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092103112.html>

¹⁴ Donald Tusk, Polish Prime Minister, quoted in "In your face, Putin! Poland signs missile defense deal", *Foreign Policy*, 14 August 2008, available at http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/category/region/eastern_europe?page=6

¹⁵ Radosław Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, "The Barack Obama Promise: A European View", Address at The Atlantic Council Washington, 19 November 2008, available at <http://www.msz.gov.pl/index.php?document=23143>

political correctness is useless whereas the answer lies with a full spectrum alliance, both political and military, one in which the threat assessment and intelligence-gathering processes are for real. The danger of politicization is real: once the “the threat assessment is skewed by political correctness, then the process of planning and contingency planning is also skewed”¹⁶.

Apparently, with the Obama new missile defence proposal we returned to where we left off in the first place- the moment of August 2008. There is hardly any change in the NATO defence posture as regards the Eastern flank - no prudent defence planning, no collective war gaming exercises, no reinforcement of Article 5 by hardpower, and no missile defence shield with its core deployed on the territory of Central Europe. But what do we have then?

First of all, an unprecedented US public campaign of reassuring the Eastern flank about the credibility of the Article 5 commitment has been underway. On September 17th, US President Obama sent out a message of reassurance to both the Czech Republic and Poland: “we are bound by the solemn commitment of NATO’s Article 5 that an attack on one is an attack on all”¹⁷. Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, was even more

expressive in trying to reassert the core value of the Euro-Atlantic community - the collective solidarity embodied by the traditional security philosophy of the old musketeers “one for all and all for one”, writing that “an attack on London or Warsaw is an attack on New York or Washington”¹⁸.

Vice-president Biden’s diplomatic tour in Warsaw, Prague and Bucharest between 20 and 24 October 2009 was the final stage of this unparalleled campaign of reasserting at the highest level the credibility of the Article 5 commitment. His message in the capital of Poland was unwavering: “under NATO’s Article 5, an attack on one is an attack on all. And this strategic assurance is absolute, absolute. As one who championed the admission of Poland into NATO, I would also point out that we take not only our mutual commitments seriously, but I take it very, very seriously”¹⁹. Moreover, as Biden emphasized, the American security guarantees as regards Poland are unalterable and they will not change.

Second, the so-called “boots on the ground” dimension, to which the states in the region attach great significance, is still on the table, as inferred from statements²⁰ that still speak about the deployment of Patriot systems in Poland.

¹⁶ Idem

¹⁷ Barack Obama, US President, “Remarks on Strengthening Missile Defense in Europe”, 17 September 2009, available at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/September/20090918102149xjsnommis0.9590876.html>

¹⁸ Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, “The new system offers a real missile defence”, *Financial Times*, 20 September 2009, available at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7b9374ea-a61a-11de-8c92-00144feabdc0.html?nclick_check=1

¹⁹ Joseph Biden, US Vice-president, “Remarks with Polish Prime Minister Tusk”, 21 October 2009, available at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/October/20091021153624xjsnommis0.9384424.html>

²⁰ Philip Gordon, Undersecretary for Eurasian Affairs in the US State Department, “A new era for Transatlantic cooperation”, Remarks at Transatlantic Policy Network, 30 September 2009, available at <http://nato.usmission.gov/Texts/Gordon093009.asp>

Simultaneously, the administration in Washington is also talking about the future NATO Strategic Concept. The speech of US Assistant Defence Secretary Alexander Vershbow, on the 22nd of October in Bratislava, reassured the Eastern flank that the US is committed to correct the security deficit of the new Member States by re-designing the old Strategic Concept of NATO in a way that will help the alliance to strike the balance between old (the static territorial collective defence) and new missions (out of area & expeditionary ones). Vershbow's conclusions were that that the best way for NATO to strike the right balance was to "develop flexible, deployable forces that can be sent into action around the periphery of the Alliance as well as at a strategic distance, for the full range of Allied missions"²¹, together with appropriate prudent planning and exercises in order to address all potential territorial threats to all the member states.

Conclusion

Ignoring or misreading these core trends developing inside the Alliance, for the sake of the greater good of doing "business as usual" with a revisionist Russia, will cause more insecurity and more security dilemmas on the Eastern flank. A détente with Russia may be in itself a very positive outcome, but only if it is doubled by a strategic consolidation of the Eastern flank. Without strategic reassurance of the New Europe in terms of its security, NATO cannot

hope in soothing the security concerns that have been haunting the region for over a year. After all, let's not forget that "hoping for the best, alliances are about preparing for conditions in which your hopes may be disappointed"²²(Sikorski).

NATO needs to rebalance its missions, redesigning its operational postures and its capabilities for both expeditionary missions and classic territorial defence, recalibrating some of its infrastructure and logistics in order to boost the security on the Eastern frontier because there is the need, in Sikorski's words, of "a full spectrum NATO, to maintain NATO as a credible not just as an alliance, but as a credible military organization". The full spectrum Alliance envisaged will be simultaneously devoted to the defence of the "in-area" homeland and to the undertaking of expeditionary missions. There is no need for an asymmetric Alliance, with a strategic landscape of higher and lower security areas. An Alliance which is not able to ensure the security of all its members, as well as to understand that security cannot be taken for granted, should not be in the business of expeditionary missions at all. While acknowledging that "the fundamental nature of man hasn't changed - and that our adversaries and other nations will always seek whatever advantages they can find"²³ (Robert Gates), NATO should not bestow on anybody the window of opportunity to speculate the strategic power vacuum growing on the Eastern flank.

²¹ Alexander R. Vershbow, Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, "Crafting the new Strategic Concept: Ambitions, Resources, and Partnerships for a 21st Century Alliance", Keynote Speech, 22 October 2009, Bratislava, available at <http://nato.usmission.gov/Texts/Vershbow10222009.asp>

²² Radosław Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, quoted in CNN Transcript, *Global Public Square*, 26 October 2008, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0810/26/fzgps.01.html>

²³ Robert Gates, US Secretary, Department of Defence, "Nuclear weapons and Deterrence in the 21st century", Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 October 2008, available at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/1028_transcrip_gates_checked.pdf

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