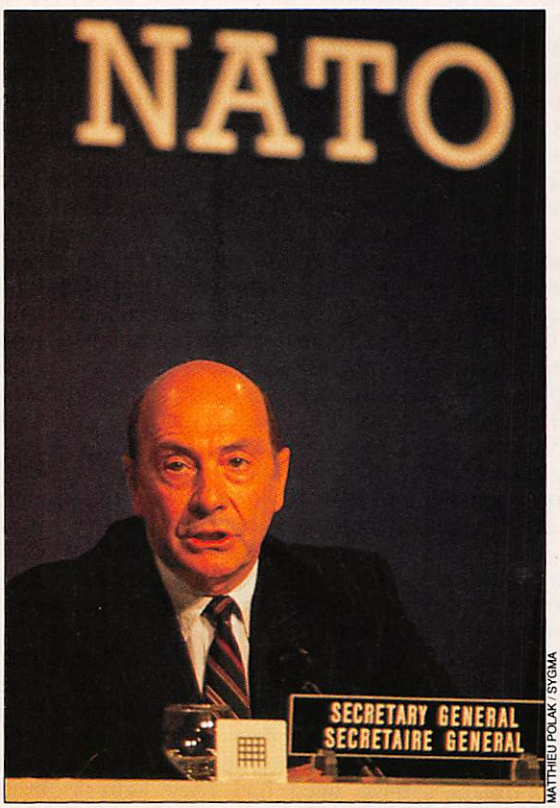
Redefined NATO Faces Growing Pains

By Henrik Bering-Jensen

Summary: As NATO draws up its blueprint for the future, it must decide what to do about the former Warsaw Pact nations. Most are eager to join the alliance; Russia, however, has its own plans for Eastern Europe.

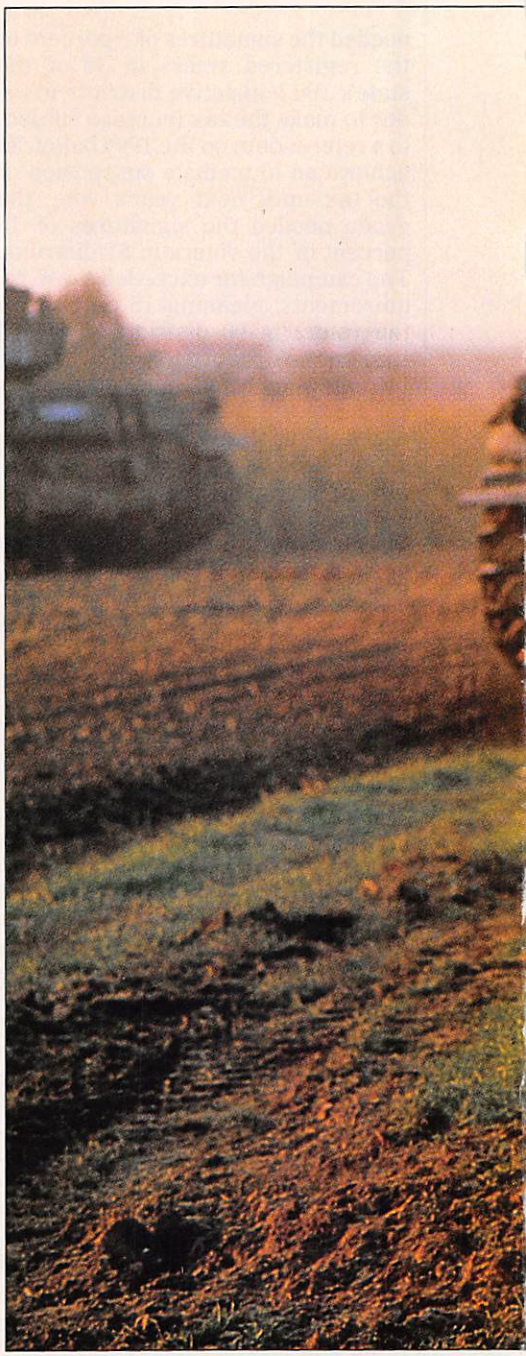


MATTHIEU POLAK / SYGMA

Woerner: *NATO must make the East stable.*

The original purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as memorably expressed by its first secretary-general, Lord Ismay, was "to keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down." For four decades after World War II, the alliance lived up to its task admirably, facing down the Soviet menace without firing a shot, solidifying transatlantic relations and maintaining peace within Europe. NATO has earned a reputation, as one observer noted, as "the most successful military alliance in history."

But with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Warsaw Pact, the future of NATO is in question. Without the Soviet threat, which provided NATO's focal point and cohesion, the alliance must carve out a new role for itself or perish. Some, such as NATO Secretary-General Manfred Woerner, argue that the alliance's primary goal must be to "project stability to the East." And others, such as Republican Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, argue that if NATO fails to take on the new challenges of militant nationalism and ethnic instability in Europe, it will become irrelevant. "Without a new mission that explicitly addresses these problems," says



Lugar, "the importance of NATO will fade away." The choice today, he adds, is not between the current NATO or a new NATO, but rather between a new NATO or no NATO at all.

A summit of the 16 NATO leaders will take place in Brussels on Jan. 10 and 11 to establish a blueprint for the future. As the representative of the most powerful member of the alliance, President Clinton is expected to take the lead, formally launching his much touted "partnership for peace" scheme for enhancing the security of Europe.

The meeting comes at a time when the transatlantic climate is less than

REGIS BOSSU / SYGMA

cordial. Recent months have seen bitter disputes over trade, and Washington has suggested that U.S. foreign policy may be shifting directions, as indicated by Secretary of State Warren Christopher's recent comment that "Western Europe is no longer the dominant area of the world." Moreover, in the alliance's first great post-Cold War test — Bosnia — it has not exactly shown its best side; its inability to stop the "ethnic cleansing" has given rise to mutual recrimination between the U.S. and its European allies.

The key question on the summit agenda is what to do about the former Warsaw Pact nations — especially Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which are lining up to join NATO as a shield against turmoil in the region and a possible political reversal in Moscow. But rather than being flattered, both NATO and the Clinton administration are in the middle of a sharp debate over the issue.

The main concern is how Moscow would react to a widening of NATO. Initially, the Russians seemed open to the idea of seeing their former client states join with the West. During President Boris Yeltsin's August visit to Poland, he stated that it was up to the Polish people, as citizens of a free and sovereign nation, to decide whether they wanted membership in NATO, a line he repeated in Prague. Only weeks later, however, the Russians changed their minds. In a letter to the main NATO governments, Moscow stated that expanding the alliance eastward would be viewed as a hostile act and an attempt to isolate Russia. As an alternative, Yeltsin has suggested joint Russian and NATO security guarantees for these countries.

For 47 years, *the alliance has made West Europeans feel more secure.*

All this puts the NATO allies in a

rather uncomfortable position. As one British diplomat says, it is a question of being damned if you do and damned if you don't.

"On the one hand, if we do not reach out in some way and strengthen the nature of the security relationship with the countries of Eastern Europe, then we are going to be guilty of frustrating the publicly expressed wishes of the newly emerging democratic nations whose aspirations and wishes we claim to support," he says. "On the other hand, we are very concerned about the possible implications of admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO and the impact this might have on those forces in Russia which are opposed to President Yeltsin's reforms. We do not want inadvertently to end up creating the very insecurity we are trying to avoid."

The East Europeans have some compelling reasons for wanting membership. While it may be considered uncouth to state it publicly nowadays, Russia remains their main security concern. Two coup attempts within the past three years have demonstrated the frailty of Russian democracy. Whatever its present weakness, Russia remains the dominant nation on the European continent, and could someday begin to reassert itself. The Russian army is already active in the former Soviet republics, fanning the fires of ethnic conflict and collapsing the republics back into the Commonwealth of Independent States, dominated by Russia.

NATO membership for the East Europeans, by providing a security framework within which they could rebuild their political and economic lives, would keep them free from Russian dominance and help cement democratic and economic reforms, thereby shoring up the stable part of Europe against turbulence further east. This kind of stability was precisely what NATO provided for Western Europe when the alliance was formed in 1947. As Czech President Vaclav Havel once said, "We have always belonged to the Western sphere of civilization and share the values upon which NATO was founded and which it exists to defend."

"We are concerned about the possible implications of admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO and the impact on those forces in Russia which are opposed to Yeltsin's reforms."

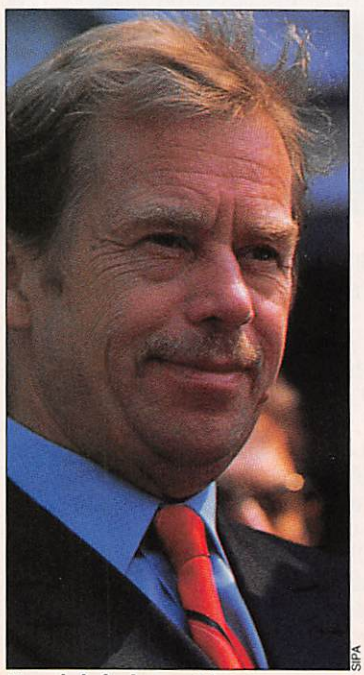
Moreover, admitting East European countries to NATO would be relatively simple compared with letting them into the European Union, as the European Community is now known. Whereas EU membership (which the East Europeans also want) involves profound changes in all areas of the life of a nation — its laws, trade practices and entire economic setup — membership in NATO involves only the area of national security.

Among the countries that have been most favorable to expanding NATO is Germany, which does not relish the idea of a power vacuum on its eastern border. "Germany does not want to be the Eastern border of the European zone of stability. Europe must not stop at the Oder-Neisse border," Manfred Weise, a member of the planning staff of the German Defense Ministry, has stated.

Referring to the mass of refugees who have come to Germany from the warring Balkans, German Defense Minister Volker Ruhe said, "If we don't export stability, we are going to wind up importing instability."

During an early December meeting in Brussels of NATO foreign ministers preparing for the January summit, Britain, France and Canada were less keen on expanding NATO, believing it would constitute a direct challenge to the Russians.

West European opponents of expansion point to the dangers of diluting the alliance by making it too big and of making commitments that NATO would not be able to honor. They point to the Hungarian crisis of 1956, in which the Eisenhower administration raised expectations that it would support



SIPA

KEYSTONE / SYGMA

Havel, left, has said *Clinton's plan would repeat the mistakes of Yalta, conceding Eastern Europe to Russia.*

GEORGES DE KEERLE / SYGMA

The frailty of democracy *in Russia is one reason East Europeans are vigorously seeking NATO membership.*

the revolt, then did nothing when the tanks rolled in. Most NATO officials want to keep the alliance's role manageable and specific and to avoid broad commitments. At the meeting in Brussels, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd ruled out any new NATO responsibilities, stating, "Unless it is threatened itself, it is unlikely that NATO will intervene in the wars of other people."

Pointing to the chaos in Bosnia, opponents of expanding the alliance further argue that a NATO reaching to the Bug River on the Russo-Polish border and to Transylvania in the south would be involved in a host of intractable border and minority disputes; Hungary, for example, has minorities in Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. A European commentator in the *International Herald Tribune* compared the task facing NATO today to securing a house after an earthquake: The smart architect does not start by adding an extra floor to the shaken house — he first tries to secure the building's base.

While acknowledging the alliance's failure in Bosnia, NATO Secretary-General Woerner has compared the logic of calling for NATO's demise because of that failure to banning doctors for the persistence of illness or disbanding the police because of the proliferation of crime.

Those who support widening NATO also say that admitting new members might help prevent future Bosnias by embedding potential troublemakers within NATO, thereby circumscribing any violence that might flow from ethnic tensions or disputed borders. They point out that it is NATO membership, more than anything else, that has prevented Greece and Turkey from going to war over Cyprus.

The Clinton administration's "partnership for peace" proposal is an attempt to bridge some of these conflicting concerns. The partnership would be offered to all former Warsaw Pact members, including Russia, and four neutral European countries. The plan envisions joint military exercises, participation in NATO military planning, gradual standardization of equipment, help with defense conversion to civilian industry and "consultation" rights with NATO for members who feel their security is threatened. As a Clinton official describes it, the plan is "a way of beginning to pull Eastern countries into Western institutions' practices and norms."

What the proposal emphatically does not do is extend to the East Europeans the security guarantees detailed in Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which commits all members to come to the aid of any member that is attacked. Neither does it offer a concrete timetable or checklist of conditions for membership, which the East Europeans had sought.

"The basic problem with the partnership for peace proposal," notes Ken Myers, a foreign policy adviser to Indiana's Lugar, "is that it does not address any of the security concerns in contemporary Europe." Stephen Larrabee, a senior policy analyst at the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, Calif., agrees. "It is somewhat of a nondecision," he says. "It holds up the prospect of membership, but it does not offer it. It seeks to buy time."

According to Larrabee, the partnership for peace idea is the result of an informal alliance between so-called Russia Firsters in the Clinton State Department (notably represented by Ambassador-at-Large Strobe Talbott, they tend to give top priority to the U.S.-Russian relationship and the survival of Yeltsin) and elements in the Pentagon that oppose taking on any new commitments or extending the U.S. nu-

clear umbrella eastward at a time of declining resources.

The weakness of the Russia First approach, administration critics argue, is that it would give Russia veto power over NATO's actions and, rather than securing and consolidating what has been won from the collapse of communism, pin American hopes on the political fortunes of one man, thereby risking losing everything.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has characterized the plan as another instance of "muddle-headed internationalism" by the Clinton administration. Kissinger wrote in a recent column, "The partnership for peace would create a vacuum in Eastern Europe. If things turn out badly in Russia, it would lead to the emergence of a no-man's-land between Germany and Russia, which has caused so many European wars. And Poland would once again be defined as a potential victim."

Not surprisingly, the reaction has been even more negative in Eastern Europe. Rather than the "grand strategy for the future" proclaimed by the Clinton administration, the East Europeans tend to see the partnership for peace plan as an exercise in casuistry, compromise and obfuscation, a diplomatic trick that attempts to pacify them without extending the security guarantees they desperately seek. Says Jacek Kalabinski of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's leading daily, "They see it is a deception."

By refusing to extend the security guarantees, East Europeans argue, America comes close to once again consigning Eastern Europe to the Russian sphere of influence, leading to accusations that Clinton is resurrecting the "ghost of Yalta," as Havel has called it, referring to the agreement among Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill in 1945 that conceded Eastern Europe to Russian hegemony. Whereas the Yalta accord could be rationalized by the fact that it merely reflected the situation on the ground at the end of World War II, yielding territory that Stalin's armies already occupied, no such excuses are valid today.

"The partnership for peace would create a vacuum in Eastern Europe. If things turn out badly in Russia, it would lead to the emergence of a no-man's-land between Germany and Russia, which has caused so many European wars. And Poland would once again be defined as a potential victim."

For most East Europeans, the partnership for peace plan makes a mockery of the idea of enhanced security by including the very power that they fear — Russia. Says a Polish diplomat, "How can you propose a partnership to the countries of Eastern and Central Europe with the same entity they are afraid of? It is not even funny."

The prospect of joint maneuvers with Russian troops is particularly distasteful to the East Europeans, who have just managed to rid themselves of Russian occupation forces. They are not alone. When the German government (which still has 32,000 Russian troops on its territory) recently found out that the Americans and Russians were planning joint "friendship" maneuvers on German soil, it immediately vetoed the idea.

By ducking the issue, critics of the Clinton administration say, the partnership for peace plan runs the risk of missing a critical moment for cementing these countries in the Western bloc.

According to Lugar's adviser Myers, there will never be an "ideal" point at which NATO membership for the East Europeans would not upset the Russians. However, one thing remains clear: Later, as Russia becomes stronger, doing so will become much more difficult.

As Kissinger wrote, "We resisted blackmail when Russia was strong; does it make sense to permit Moscow to blackmail us now with its domestic weakness?"

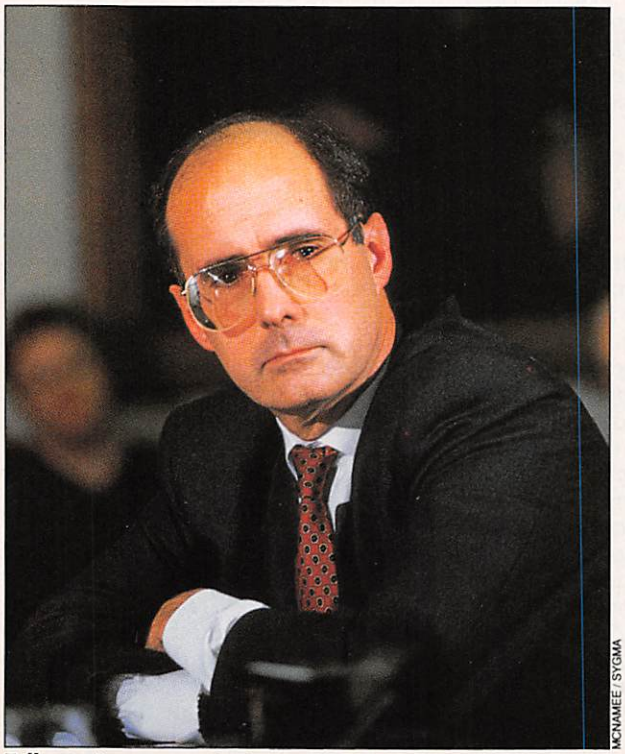
Says the Polish diplomat who rules out the idea of a partnership with Russia, "Time is acting against us."

Officially, however, there is not much the East Europeans can do but play along, choosing to interpret the partnership for peace plan as a first step toward membership, a kind of apprenticeship, rather than as a rebuff.

While a growing chorus of isolationism in the United States is calling for America to stay out of Europe entirely, history suggests that may be impossible.

The rationale for continued U.S. engagement in Europe has perhaps been best expressed by Havel: "I am convinced that the American presence in Europe is still necessary. In the 20th century, it was not just Europe that paid the price for American isolationism. America itself paid a price. The less it committed itself in the beginning of European conflagrations, the greater the sacrifices it had to make at the end of such conflicts."

Over the past 40 years, the United States has invested a great deal politically, economically and militarily in Europe to work out a stable security order there. As Kissinger has pointed out, NATO, for all its flaws and shortcomings, "remains America's sole institutional link with Europe and the most natural way for the United States to influence the political evolution in Europe." •



MCNAMEE/SYGMA

Talbott gives *top priority to U.S.-Russian relations.*