

Is Transatlantic Dissension Inevitable?

By Tomáš Zálešák

An institutional crisis that affected NATO after the end of the cold war came as a result of changes in global and European environment although the Alliance proved to be very successful in the past. Its future shape has not been presented in a clear concept yet and this is the reason why our considerations regarding the maintenance or enlargement of NATO or our potential accession to it are very often intuitive and emotional. Although our arguments seem to be self-evident at first sight, when trying to analyse them we will discover that their effect depends on many factors that we are not able to foresee to a sufficient extent.

The truth is that NATO is a military tool which has proved to be very successful. But the fact that a tool – as Margaret Thatcher pointed out in Fulton in 1996 – does not define its own purpose is also true. In other words, a purpose is set by those who design, make and use the tool.

NATO originally served to stop the expansion of the communist block. After the communist block crashed, NATO naturally had to answer the question „how to go on“. The change of situation, demise of some old threats and rise of new threats call for a re-definition of the Alliance, the re-definition that will affect all its spheres: beginning with its geographical scope and field of activity, and ending with arm system designs; from strategic doctrine to tactical details. When seen from this point of view, the discussion that is going on in NATO on a much larger scale than ever before, will not remain only – I emphasize - a discussion club, it does not have to be necessarily seen as something negative.

The setting of new strategy and tactics to cope with new threats naturally requires a confrontation of opinions. A security strategy demands political consent and willingness. We cannot avoid troublesome questions just by calling them illegitimate. The psychological need to put historical periods into the communist and post communist times has its importance and shows something consequential. This need cannot be excluded from a set of reasons for the maintenance of NATO and for accession. But this „need“ alone is not enough to persuade those who are not convinced. Moreover, our need to feel good will not be satiated if NATO is not really an effective tool for our security.

Anyway, I think that there are objective reasons for the preservation of the Alliance as well as for our membership. The reasons are based on a presumption that there still is a wider base for consent, for a consent similar to the one which led to the creation of the Alliance some time ago. I will try to formulate an answer to our initial question in an indirect way – I will analyze some objections calling NATO into question and a wider framework for fundamental consent as well as the values on which the Alliance is based. This will not be the citations of specific people, but formulations that should give a true picture of the basic character of various objections which are repeatedly presented on

various occasions. The question of NATO's prospect and the question of the transatlantic partnership prospect are linked in a broader meaning of the word. Therefore I will not overly separate them. But now, let's approach possible objections:

The first one:

„Although there is a debate on NATO's reform and some common attitudes are being defined, the Alliance will never reach the same level of effectiveness when coping with new threats, as it showed when holding communism back, which was the original purpose it was created for. The reason is that its geographical scope is too wide and covers too many miscellaneous environments and the process of search for consensus is too complicated. In case there is a need to act quickly, we will be left with nothing else but reliance on „ad hoc alliances“ or „coalitions of the willing“.

If any voluntary coalition decides to act and will be capable of acting, we cannot expect that other Alliance's members will share the same opinion, as was well proved in the case of Iraq. This fact only underlines NATO's lack of function in new conditions. Why should we then waste energy on the maintenance of NATO and not focus on the creation of a more adequate alternative? NATO will disintegrate.“

The second objection is more radical:

„Despite certain similarities in political structures of the NATO countries, there is no consent even on fundamental questions regarding the values that are to be defended. What American public and American representation consider valuable is not the same for Europe or what respective European states consider worth defending. The verdict: Not only the disintegration of NATO but also transatlantic dissension are inevitable. This dissension reaches every sphere – the creation of security structures, defence doctrines, economy, political and cultural relations.“

The third and the most radical objection is an echo of opinions shared by today's post modern bohemians and their Marxist predecessors, or their ultra-right sparring partners:

„The whole „transatlantic partnership“ is one great hoax. Not only is there no consent in fundamental values, but the values alone have always only been an ideological construction hiding coercive and an alienating power structures inside. The false nobility of allegedly common goals is something that should decline radically together with the goals. There is no need to waste time with objections regarding the inadequacy of technical means or those regarding cultural differences. We neither want reforms or the cultivation of „good relations“, we want revolution. Down with NATO in the name of a new Europe and New World!“

These propositions might be brought further. We could get a whole range of opinions when describing various attitudes beginning with well intended sceptical remarks to nihilistic and cynical phantasmagorias of diverse radicals and disseminators of conspiracy theories. But this sample will suffice for now. In order to get to a final conclusion I will answer the objections in reverse order. It means that I will start at the

most radical end of our spectrum. The type of answer depends on the quality of the proposition.

Radical accusations cannot be answered in the manner forced upon us by a radical fantasy. There is no sense in explaining that we do not commit the crimes that we are blamed for. Seen from his theory's point of view, we are guilty anyway. But if somebody wants to see only a skeleton of brutal and usurped power when looking at any society, he revokes his own entitlement to moral superiority. He alone cannot offer anything else but another „brutal alternative to power“ although he will vehemently deny it in a discussion. We are familiar with examples in history and there is no need to deal with them here. Radicals say that we should not trust anybody. Therefore, let's not trust them.

The second objection mentioning cultural differences sounds more serious and it is not so obviously self-destructive, though it will not conceal a sinister flavour of value relativism.

But let's come back to the issue: what if our cultural differences and final interests are, despite concordance concerning some elementary moral beliefs, at variance so much that they cannot prevent a deep dissension between America and Europe?

My answer is certainly not a definite answer, but I allow myself to draw your attention to common history while emphasising the partnership in handling the catastrophes of the 20th century and particularly a history of the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Let intellectuals speculate about cultural differences as much as they wish. Hopefully, politicians in America will not forget how delusive the objectives of isolationism (which was apart from other things also a specific form of American feeling of moral superiority) proved to be. And especially when it comes to European politicians, it certainly will not do any harm if they recall who they have to thank for the fact that their countries were able to rise from ruins, and to start building their peaceful prosperity after 1945, a prosperity which is now being used to substantiate a supposed moral superiority of Europe over America. It seems that European politicians are not only losing their memories of recent history, but they are also losing their common sense that they need for the future. From this frame of reference, today's mostly verbal fights between Europe and the U.S.A. could seem to be only choppy water that covers agreement on deeper and more elementary principles. In any case, seeking after conflicts and arousing them is the worst way of how to „solve“ a situation. Providing that this is not what we are after.

The first, and maybe well intended, objection mentioned the technical inadequacy of NATO being a tool of common security. Undoubtedly, NATO is transforming into a form that will be, besides some other features, more flexible in creating short-term partnerships. This is given by the already mentioned fact that the Alliance is gaining in size and is to unite a wider scale of opinions and interests. But is this really a problem for the future of the Atlantic Alliance?

The differences in positions and interests of respective countries could have been pointed out also in cold war times. But a long-term and common threat was the most important factor uniting the countries with respect to their final goals. Holding communism back was an essential precondition even above considerations about the

promotion of own interests. It would be possible to object that today there is no clear common and acute threat of this character and that is the reason why there is no agreement on a security concept. But today's „new threats“ are complex. They overlap borders of respective states. They require a complex answer which could be given only by broad international co-operation. Seen from this point of view, it is correct that NATO changes into a flexible military structure that should have the capacity to intervene in more remote places. This allows – actually requires – a higher level of military specialisation in respective member states. The states do not have to have complete and self-sufficient armies featuring every weapon system, but they are to participate with their own specialised sectors in the whole concept. It will be necessary to support developments towards mobile and qualified military powers based on „smart weapons“ technologies of and „smart soldiers“.

When we speak about international terrorism, it also has its geopolitical side. Terrorism arises in certain areas and there are „rogue“ states that support it.

At present, terrorism based on radical Islam poses the greatest actual threat. When taken from this framework of reference, maybe NATO should concentrate its capacity more in the East or South East than until now –as well as some other areas also in the south-east edge of Europe, the Balkans and maybe also in Turkey. This also means that on the future NATO will not manage by using only the powers of fast and short-term deployment. Greater conventional powers will be needed not in order to win short military operations, but to maintain peace, support the creation of new regimes, cope with unrest and restrain the enemy in critical regions. This part of the common problem is serious because the public in democratic countries is usually more sensitive to long lasting low intensive but wearing out wars that require means, sacrifice and long term involvement than to short and unquestionably successful actions. If the Alliance cannot handle this task then the advancement of the capacities prepared for a war without political targets might prove to be useless. Here it is not necessary to be technologically capable but to have a higher level of endurance, determination and morals in the traditional meaning of the word.

We may expect that the European enemies of America and opponents of the Alliance will enthusiastically point out, that momentary success in a military operation, does not grant permanent success in coping with instability in sensitive geopolitical regions. Iraq and Afghanistan may serve as examples. It is also possible to again draw attention to unresolved problems in the Balkans. Also slogans reminding of „the Vietnamese mud“ may become sources of concern for the western allies and an inspiration for their opponents in the future too.

The fact that there are long-term and hard to solve security problems does not cast doubt upon the need for an alliance. On the contrary, it only makes this need stronger. And today we have to applaud those European allies of the USA in Iraq who despite recent losses show a readiness to complete their mission. If this determination lasts, it will represent a hope for the future.

Naturally, NATO is not the same alliance today as it was when restraining communism, and it never will be like this again. But this does not necessarily mean that its new form,

which is being created at the moment, will not be needed. If the new structure, despite the changes that the alliance has undergone, keeps its old name from the cold war time it probably is because of the great symbolic power of the name. What it symbolises is success, victory for a free society with all its imperfections over doctrinaire and revolutionary fanaticism that promises to eliminate imperfection from human existence forever. To admit ones imperfection does not mean weakness.

And even today it does not have to be a sign of weakness if the transatlantic partnership admits it has problems, arguments, and has question marks about the future. There is a base for broader consensus.

Recently, Henry Kissinger expressed his opinion on the future of the transatlantic co-operation in these words:

„NATO is not enough as the only institutional framework for Atlantic co-operation. A forum for Atlantic co-operation outside the security sphere that will involve all the European Union states including these that are not NATO members, various institutions of the European Union and North American NATO members – the United States, Canada and eventually Mexico is needed too.“ (Kissinger, 2002, p. 65)¹

This citation says in other words that the transatlantic partnership represents a wider context of shared values, experience and interests. Common security concept might be a logical result of concord in fundamental interests for different countries. If it is so then there is no need to worry about a lack of reasons for the maintenance of the transatlantic partnership including its security segment.

What is to be feared are an irresponsible policy, loss of historical memory and enticements resulting from an ideologically distorted perception of reality. This distortion surfaces for instance as various unrealistic dreams about the elimination of problems and threats by ignoring them. Dreams about peace and democracy that might be ensured by talking about them frequently, and using them as a magic formula. Dreams about a good living standard for everybody that might be provided by tying regulations to the market economy, redistribution and the implementation of protectionist measures and trade wars helping to promote national economic interests.

Transatlantic dissension is not inevitable. But if there is some, it will not come as a result of historical necessity, not even as a result of the superannuation of the partnership between Europe and America. The only reason will be political blindness. That is what we have to face and assume the risk that we will be labelled as extremists, dreamers, enemies of progress or even enemies of peace. We are not afraid of that but we must be afraid of falling prey to the above enticements.

The author is a political scientist, foreign policy analyst and co-worker of the Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik. He is an advisor to the Chairman of the Slovak Parliament.

The article was presented at a conference held by the Conservative Institute of M. R.

¹ Kissinger, Henry: Does America need a foreign policy? Prague, 2002.

Štefánik **Is There Any Future for NATO?** which took place on 8 December 2003 in Bratislava, Slovakia. It is available at <http://www.institute.sk>.