The Alliance continues to play an irreplaceable role

A long time ago, when I was part of the opposition to Communist dictatorship, I thought that if the Iron Curtain ever fell, communism collapsed and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, NATO would also lose its raison d’être as a principal tool of the policy of “containment.” But once the Iron Curtain did indeed begin to fall, and I entered practical politics, I soon realized how naive I had been and how important was NATO’s continued existence. In fact, I came to feel that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had just arrived at its great historic test: Whether it would have the courage to embrace new European democracies and thus prove its genuine commitment to protecting the values it was called upon to defend at its founding.

The alternative would be to show that it lacked that courage and was still rigidly entrenched in its Cold War ways – unwilling to be involved in creating a new world order. But it seems that many of those who were, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the most fervent advocates of NATO’s continued existence now wonder whether it has outlived its purpose. Conversely, many who doubted that the alliance would be meaningful in the future are now among its greatest defenders. I am among those who sincerely believe the alliance does have an irreplaceable role, now and likely in the future. And the deeper NATO goes in reflecting on its role, the more significant that role will be. Indeed, there are signs that we are coming to an era in which NATO must ponder its future thoroughly and then act quickly to translate its vision into a number of specific and audacious steps.

In order to redefine itself, NATO will have to do two things. First, the alliance must arrive at a new and unequivocal definition of its approach to other parts of the planet, infuse such an approach with the spirit of absolute equality, and begin to deepen it by institutional as well as practical cooperation.

NATO is attempting to change the quality of its relations with Russia, which is certainly worthwhile; but, in doing so, it must not raise even a shadow of suspicion that the more affluent northern

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hemisphere is somehow ganging up on the other parts of the world and thus widening the gap that divides it from the southern part of the globe. It is for this reason – but certainly not only for this reason – that NATO must build its relations with China, India, Africa and other parts of the world.

Second, NATO must, in its own interest, open its doors to new European democracies, while at the same time setting a limit on its possible future enlargement. Otherwise, no future enlargement will make sense. (All the Balkan countries and all the «neutral European democracies» are undoubtedly considered possible candidates for future membership). Saying that drawing such a border line will create a new Iron Curtain means being mired in a Cold War world, in which the only conceivable border is the one that separates us from our enemies and, therefore, has to be barb-wired. In addition, NATO will have to significantly accelerate its internal transformation.

Sept. 11 has, one hopes, made everyone understand that the single powerful and clearly situated strategic enemy of the past, «the Evil Empire», has long since been replaced by what is perhaps an even more dangerous enemy: a dispersed evil that is sophisticated yet hard to grasp, whose empire, focal point or axis I would dare not identify (though some regimes certainly serve evil more than others).

What specifically will such a transformation mean? Smaller but highly mobile, robust and technologically advanced armed forces, highly specialized and capable of immediate cooperation of various missions. And, as important, well-coordinated development of intelligence, research and civil defense for the protection of people and property.

The final issue NATO now needs to consider in all seriousness is the fact that it stands on two feet – one European and one American. Given the advances in European integration, the Alliance must say very clearly how it proposes to resolve the issue – whether to come down on one foot or the other or both – and thus make clear how it proposes to move ahead.

The Alliance will likely discuss all these issues at its November summit in Prague. The Czech Republic feels a great sense of honor and responsibility to have been asked to host debates on issues of such significance in its capital, a city in which, coincidentally, I had the pleasure of announcing the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact 11 years ago.

I trust that apart from offering membership to several European countries, including the three Baltic republics – thus symbolically closing once and forever the era of superpower pacts dividing the world – NATO will achieve first and foremost significant progress in its self-assessment. I hope NATO will confirm, in clear terms, its willingness to work with Russia and other large and important entities in today’s world as equal partners. May it demonstrate, by concrete decisions, its commitment to face the strange and insidious dangers that threaten the world.

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