
The Czech Republic and the United States: Implications of NATO Expansion

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Journal: How will the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to include Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary affect or change the role of the United States in Europe?

Vondra: Of course, people see as in the Czech, as well as the Polish or Hungarian, interest to enlarge NATO, but not only looking for a security umbrella or a U.S. commitment to share the responsibility of defense and safeguarding democracy in the center of Europe—there is a further interest. Those nations who are located in the center of Europe in this area between Germany and Russia, they all share historical experience. I think we have an elementary interest in keeping the U.S. presence in Europe. No doubt, this American presence is justified by NATO. Without this presence, there would not be any NATO and without NATO there would not be any substantial presence in Europe.

The purpose of NATO during the Cold War was to contain the communist and Soviet threat, but not only this. The other purpose was to create the general conditioning in Europe to allow European integration to flourish; the project of European integration is in the interest of the United States because to have Europe organized would be at least cheaper and safer for America as well. This project is not finished yet. There are reasons for the continued existence of

NATO and, in our eyes, reasons for continuing a U.S. presence in Europe as a mechanism to avoid situations that once engulfed the European powers in conflict. From a European perspective, shared by Germans, Polish, and many others, there are still a lot of reasons for NATO and a U.S. presence. In this light, I think that NATO enlargement, in an area which is no less important for the stability of the continent than, say, the northern flank or the southern flank—a center flank—is very important. With this enlargement, NATO expressed the will to take responsibility for the future of Europe.

Journal: Can the European powers of NATO readily assume this responsibility, or will the United States need to continue to provide for security in Europe? Do you look for Europe to play a greater role in NATO as it reforms and expands, possibly assuming a leadership capacity?

Vondra: The trend in Europe now is toward integration. There is the European Union, a common market, the economic and monetary union (EMU) project and a single currency, but still we are far away from the moment when the EU or EMU will be able to work in stable conditions over time. The crucial task is not to launch a project but to keep it alive when problems appear. EMU is not a union in the full sense; the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) is still far

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away. Perhaps it is the goal, but it's not fulfilled yet. The ability of Europe or of the European Union to act as one entity in such critical affairs as defense or foreign policy is still limited—better than it was twenty years ago, but not one entity like, for example, the United States. This problem has appeared; there was not a single European approach or policy vis-à-vis such problems in Bosnia. I

think that a lesson is, from our perspective, that U.S. involvement is still very much needed, including the factor of U.S. leadership. NATO is something like the combination of the intergovernmental consensus building mechanism and U.S. leadership. It's a unique mechanism and Europe needs that.

Journal: Speaking from a Czech perspective in regard to security needs, given the state of NATO reform, is the current internal structure of NATO sufficient to meet new challenges arising in the post-Cold War period, or will further reform become necessary?

Vondra: There is development in this direction—the adoption of a new strategic concept in 1991 and now another debate about the new strategic concept which

will hopefully be adopted in a summit here in Washington next year. I think what is important is that the acclimation of NATO to the post-Cold War condition is gradual. NATO is no doubt the most successful alliance of this century and, to keep the cohesion and consensus inside NATO, we don't need any radical changes which can destroy this consensus.

At the same time, some gradual development to be able to respond to these challenges either inside the European area or "out of area" is needed, and NATO is doing that—for example, in Iraq in 1991–92. There were some changes in military infrastructure and the Czechs have participated in that already. Bosnia is another example of such new activity, out of area, when the U.S. and NATO are involved. I think that we will face a similar situation in the near future that threatens European and American interests. What is important, in my eyes, is to balance this somehow. It is important to keep NATO as it is—Article V is the core function of NATO. At the same time, there are changes needed in order to effectively respond to current conditions and maintain consensus.

Journal: Madeleine Albright has discussed NATO enlargement as the expansion of an "alliance without borders." Henry Kissinger contradicts this idea, stating that an alliance, by definition, draws lines on a map. Is NATO expansion merely going to extend the lines eastward while essentially preserving NATO much as it was during the Cold War?

Vondra: I think we have at least two borders here in our minds to discuss. Border number one is the border protected by Article VI of the treaty—the territorial defense pledge of the alliance, which has remained the same since 1949. Then there is another border which is not so geographically specified as the first in Article VI. This is basically the borders defined by common sense in the joint activity of NATO to respond to a certain crisis or a certain type of conflict outside of the NATO area.

NATO can be used when we have the guarantee that it would not destroy NATO itself because this first mission of NATO—collective defense—is still important, but there is also the element of consensus. I think that Bosnia and the Gulf War are examples when this type of mission out of area and this type of consensus are possible (despite some obstruction—the French defense minister, if I remember well).

Journal: Supposing that NATO expands in its proposed second stage of enlargement to the Baltic states, Slovenia, and Romania, in the event of a crisis anywhere near the Russian border, is there any doubt in the minds of Eastern and Central Europeans that the U.S. might not respond, despite its commitments to NATO?

Vondra: We can trust the letter of commitment in the treaty. I can imagine the types of conflicts which will not be comfortable issues but at the same time we have to trust the commitment in the treaty. The current approach to NATO enlargement—both waves of enlargement, either in 1991 when NATO expanded to the eastern part of Germany or in 1998 to these three countries—does not disengage Russia and takes in to careful consideration the interests of others interested in discussions with Russians. I expect this open door policy will help.

Journal: Would the Czech Republic be comfortable with a NATO that was to eventually include Russia?

Vondra: Good question. I think there are three elements that are central. Number one, Western civilization is a generally open one. It's not building walls—just the contrary. It's building activist instruments. It's about democracy and all the things we have decided to safeguard. The first conclusion (and my recommendation) is not to say Russia: never. That would not be wise; it would go against the nature of our values. Number two is Russian intentions. This openness must be reflected on both sides. I do not expect the Russian application in the very near future, knowing such things about the thinking in Russia. Then there is a third element which is quite important. NATO applicants are challenged to focus on certain criteria. Those ideas are defined as democracy, political stability, human rights, and so on and so forth. But at the same time, I would say there is another unwritten principle that is the combination of U.S. leadership with consensus building. In my eyes, every new candidate must respect that.

To answer these basic questions you need to ask the Russians. I remember the last NATO-Russia conference in Prague—I was sitting with the Russian ambassador to NATO, discussing this in all aspects, rather privately. My last question was: "If Russia were to apply, are you ready to respect this unique character of NATO—this combination of U.S. leadership and consensus building?" His answer was: "Never, there are two and a half countries in the world that would not be able to respect this unique character of NATO—Russia, China, and half is France." That's the typical answer of somebody reflecting on the thinking of a power like Russia.

Journal: There are many who argue that NATO should become a forum for increased European input and even limited leadership through the Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF), and the French in particular have pushed for the development of a European defense identity (EDI). That itself goes against this unique character of NATO; and NATO expansion, in bringing in three Central European states with their own particular interests, may exacerbate French fears of increased American dominance and influence that could threaten to stifle Euro-

pean integration and development. Is this a key concern for expansion and will it be important to maintain American leadership over the long term, keeping European integration on the economic but not political track since it could plausibly erode U.S. leadership in Europe?

Vondra: I don't see NATO enlargement as a mechanism to slow down the process of European integration. I am not a man who has any fear of U.S. dominance. You know, for somebody in Central Europe you can discuss to what extent it is comfortable to have so many McDonald's in the historical downtown of Prague. But basically it is not a problem in my eyes. We are not a country which aspires to have the Czech language as the lingua franca in the world. We understand there must be some common language and we don't aspire to seeing the Czech language be this lingua franca. So you must choose, then, and I think we have experienced the German language during the Second World War, we have experience with the Russian language from the time of the Soviet expansion and you know, the English, I don't have any problem with it. ☺