

Atlantic Council debates expansion of NATO, as Russians warn of war danger

by William Jones

While a steady drumbeat is coming from Republican circles in Washington, demanding the expansion of NATO in order to bring in the countries of eastern Europe, the recent Russian elections are bringing forth more voices of caution in the West, regarding what Russian observers view as provocative moves on the part of the West. This was manifest at a conference sponsored by the Atlantic Council, held on June 13-14 at the U.S. State Department. The Council, a non-profit public policy organization that functions as a political support group for NATO, regularly brings together Western parliamentarians and military people to discuss issues of importance for the NATO alliance.

Coming after the recent Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the beginning of June in Berlin, in which the French officially began their entry into the Alliance, the conference had to deal with the changes that have been made in NATO structure in light of the changed international situation. The continual resistance of Great Britain and France to the urging of the United States for strong military action in Bosnia, had taken its toll on NATO collaboration. The consolidation of an Anglo-French entente, aimed at undermining U.S. leadership in the military alliance, has also caused increasing tensions.

The most controversial issue, broached but not decided at the Berlin meeting, was, however, NATO expansion. A decision on this has been put off until the end of the year, when it is hoped the situation in Russia will become clearer, after the turmoil of the June-July election period. Also with an eye on Russian elections, and fearing the possible accession to power of a more aggressive government in Russia, the nations of eastern Europe were clamoring for an acceleration of the process of NATO expansion.

Republican push for expanding NATO

This has become a convenient wedge for Presidential hopeful Bob Dole, concerned about narrowing the gap between himself and President Bill Clinton in the polls, and anxious to secure substantial votes in states with a large community of east European origin. Although the Clinton administration has agreed in principle to NATO expansion, it has

proceeded very cautiously, mindful of the repercussions such a move might have on the very precarious political situation in Russia. The administration has, however, been under heavy pressure from the Republican-dominated Congress to accelerate the pace.

In 1994, Republicans in Congress introduced legislation that called for an expansion that would include those countries in Central Europe that wanted to join. In 1995, they raised the pressure a notch, by introducing another bill that would mandate the President to establish a transition program and plan for NATO expansion. Now, on June 4, Senator Dole, shortly before making his exit from the U.S. Senate to campaign full-time for President, introduced legislation, the "NATO Participation Act of 1996," that calls for increasing the tempo of expansion, with an immediate decision to bring in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In the floor debate on the issue, Republican defense honchos attacked the Clinton administration for "foot-dragging" on the issue.

The affected countries themselves have not hesitated to play on the internal political fight in the United States, to get themselves into what they mistakenly believe will be a militarily more secure situation. Former Polish President Lech Walesa, in a visit to the United States at the time, took part in a press conference, together with Republican leaders who had introduced the latest NATO bill.

Reflecting a rather belligerent attitude on the subject in his speech to the Atlantic Council conference on June 13, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) called for NATO enlargement, regardless of the possible Russian reaction. "I believe NATO enlargement will actually temper Russia's treatment of its neighbors," McCain said, "but assuming it has the opposite effect, we still possess sufficient leverage, I believe, to avert Russian assaults on the sovereignty of those nations." The Western nations should, in McCain's view, "publicly affirm that we would regard Russian retaliation against the Baltics and Ukraine in response to the admission into NATO of the Visegrad states (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) to be a challenge to our own security, and make clear to Russia the consequences of any challenge to the sovereignty of those states." McCain cited several times his mentor, Henry Kis-

singer, who had caustically remarked that NATO expansion required “a decision, not a study.”

Russian worries

Russian Ambassador to the United States Yuli Vorontsov, speaking at the conference on June 14, characterized NATO expansion as a “half-baked idea.” “NATO enlargement is not the way to go into the 21st century,” Vorontsov said. “Let’s not prepare for World War III,” the Russian ambassador warned, “but let’s prepare for addressing common problems.” “Whoever is planning this is taking a step backwards, back to the thinking of the 1950s. Russia is against enlargement, because we’re looking forward. It would be elementary wisdom to try to see what the likely effects of what such a policy would have. Such a discussion is helping the reactionary elements in our culture. European security must start with a new approach.” It was not the political organization of NATO that was the problem, Vorontsov indicated, but rather the expansion of NATO as a military alliance. “If there is a movement of military forces closer to our borders, then we’re worried. If someone imposes on us a new military situation, we will react,” Vorontsov said, warning that this could lead to the stationing of Russian tactical missiles closer to its western borders, and an end to all attempts to reduce nuclear weapons.

The Russian ambassador warned that the enlargement concept was an indication that people are living in the past. “It’s difficult to get rid of the psychology of the Cold War,” Vorontsov said. “Those who are proposing such an idea don’t understand the need to change.” Vorontsov noted that the Yeltsin government had circulated a memorandum with its own ideas on European security arrangements, in March 1996, which included a proposal for a charter of all-European security. Vorontsov also emphasized that if there was a need for the countries of eastern Europe to have “security assurances,” safeguarding their sovereignty, Russia was prepared to sign on as a party to such guarantees.

Dissenting voices

The Russian ambassador was supported in his position by former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock, who broke with the prevailing enthusiasm at the meeting for NATO expansion. Matlock, who had served as the Soviet specialist on Ronald Reagan’s National Security Council, had served as ambassador to the Soviet Union during the breakup of the U.S.S.R. under Mikhail Gorbachov. Matlock was even more emphatic than the Russian ambassador had been, that NATO enlargement should not occur. “There is no more important issue today than bringing Russia into the world economy,” Matlock said. “Our basic interests [Russia and the United States], if properly understood, are not in conflict.”

Bringing Russia into a state of “economic prosperity” was in the interest of Russia, of the United States, and of NATO, Matlock said. He also countered the arguments of the pro-

expansion Republicans, that taking consideration of the Russian arguments would be equivalent to giving them a “veto” over NATO decisions. “If an issue affects their vital interests,” Matlock said, “don’t they have a legitimate say in how that issue is to be resolved? I understand fully the desire of the east European countries to be a part of a security umbrella, but unless enlargement occurs in the context of security arrangements in which Russia is, and feels itself, a part,” it would be a dangerous move.

“I don’t see any security vacuum in the East. NATO, of course, is not a threat to Russia,” but enlargement “will make more difficult the building of democratic institutions in Russia.” “You can’t isolate Russia from the rest of Europe,” Matlock warned. He also attacked the conception of adhering to outmoded defense concepts in a totally new situation. NATO enlargement “is like building the Maginot Line,” Matlock said. “We are thinking of the threats of the past, rather than those of the future.”

During the question period other questioners drew the analogy to the pre-World War I period, in which the series of alliances crafted by England’s King Edward VII, creating a virtual encirclement of Germany, made war virtually inevitable.

The Clinton policy

The Clinton administration has attempted to avoid a confrontation with its Republican opponents on the issue, by means of a subterfuge. A completely new entity, Partners for Peace (PFP) was developed to meet the need. The east European countries, as well as Russia and Ukraine, would be able to enter PFP without any preconditions, thus creating the basis for military collaboration, joint maneuvers, and the like, and an “interface” on military issues with the eastern European countries and members of the Community of Independent States. It was thought that if PFP collaboration with Russia were developed in such a way as to involve Russia in close military collaboration (and at the same time enticing Moscow with the promise of eventual NATO membership), Russia would balk less at the Visegrad countries entering NATO.

Matlock made clear, however, that much of this was just wishful thinking on the part of those planning enlargement. “NATO expansion to the eastern European countries would be seen as closing the door” for the Russians, he said. In a swipe at Kissingerian geopolitics, Matlock commented, “Countries aren’t like billiard balls, up for grabs unless they are allied with a bigger country. To think we can exclude Russia and get a Europe that is safe for us, is, I think, to follow a very unwise policy.”

While Matlock and others are absolutely on target in their observations about NATO expansion, there still remains the issue of an effective defense policy for the 21st century. This topic is addressed in a campaign statement by Lyndon LaRouche, published elsewhere in this issue.