

NATO, Quo Vadis? Europe Returns to the Confrontations of the Cold War Era Amid Global Uncertainty

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Global Research, June 05, 2014

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Religion](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

25 years ago almost to this day, I recall being a fairly young “cub reporter” full of enthusiasm and energy and great optimism for the future. I stood along with a pack of “seasoned” American and Polish reporters and European senior correspondents on the tarmac of the Ociece airport in Warsaw, as George Bush (the elder) stepped off Air Force One. Waiting to greet him was General-Polish president Jaruzelski (who ominously passed away recently), the architect of the “round table” talks which led to a peaceful transition in Poland away from communist dictatorship to democracy. It was great moment in history. Europe was “whole and free” once more.

And perhaps for the US president (unlike his son George W. Bush Jr. , the “draft dodger”, the father fought bravely in WWII) or for him, being back in re-liberated Eastern Europe in 1989, maybe felt like re-living V - E Day (or victory in Europe) again . After the army band played the national anthems, I sneaked on the bus reserved for “White House press corps” only, with my companion a budding French photographer. Then we were whisked away (under the suspicious stare of the secret service), to Lech Walesa’s private estate on the outskirts of Gdansk. There in this splendid bucolic setting the American president met according to protocol “Informally” with the Solidarity leader and soon to be next leader of the country.

Bush senior announced a huge aid package worth billions for Poland and soon the “Paris club” of bankers and Poland’s creditors would absolve the country of all its foreign debts.

A new beginning was underway for Poland it seemed. Free markets and democratic freedoms would triumphantly reign over the old continent and peace and prosperity was at hand. It was such a magic moment for all us to report on to the world’s newspaper readers and mass media consumers.

Poland -US ties: From President Bush the “cold war warrior” to President Barack “Yes, we can!” Obama

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the first post-communist “free elections” in eastern and central Europe. With the mid-term congressional elections probably in his mind, the US president extolled that: “Poland will never stand alone”. A clear message aimed at his domestic audience, in his home town (full of voters of Polish background) Chicago. Which brings me to ask: Who is the better guarantor of Poland’s security in the White House, a democrat or a Republican? Poland was always up for grabs among the US multicultural electorate.

Obama's political mentor, Bill Clinton in the 1990s, was a key player in driving force in pushing for NATO's eastward expansion to Poland (for obvious electoral and less then sentimental reasons). Later on, George W. Bush not to be outdone by his predecessor , paid several visits to Poland during his two terms in office to thank the post-communist country for its unflinching support in the "war on terror". Poland in return sent thousands of troops (and suffered hundreds of casualties) or had boots on the ground, in both Afghanistan and Iraq for over a decade. Over the past 25 years, the country's foreign policy or ardent pro -American stance is driven for legitimate historical reasons, or by a vehement anti-Russian sentiment. Moreover, Warsaw sees itself as spearheading the struggle to wield Ukraine free of the centuries old yolk of Russian domination.

Its strategic partnership with Washington is seen as natural and vital in this regard. The US in return, acts as an enabler, using its foreign bases (CIA training camps and NATO installations) in Poland as a springboard for its "war on terror"; or against other potential foes such as Iran or Russia. Thus the bi-lateral relationship is mutually beneficial. It works well. Or as the saying goes: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

1944-1989 to the Present: From a world war, to the post war era, to today's renewed rivalries and divisions

The Americans in 1944 had freed Western Europe and in 1989, they did the same, (or so goes the official State Department line) for Europe's "poor cousins" located in the eastern half of the continent. It was indeed a momentous accomplishment. Europe was "whole and free" once again and it seemed back then that from now on all Europeans from Sweden to Spain, to the coast of Brittany to the Baltic Sea, would live in peace, prosperity and freedom, under the benevolent stewardship of both NATO and the EU.

In other words, the old order based on perpetual military and ideological confrontation which characterised the 20th century was blown away with the victorious winds of war, and "never again" would return. Old hostilities which haunted or overshadow the continent were dispelled forever. Looking back on those days today, makes the present seem like a grotesque joke or a re-run from an old propaganda newsreel full of lies and deception. It's a bitter disappointment, indeed.

1989 or 1939?

For instance when I glance at the headline in the major European (Austrian, French, British, and Spanish etc.) press during this week's historical fest, I am befuddled and confused. Are European leaders living in the world of yesterday again? Are they suffering from collective amnesia or delusion maybe? Have they forgotten their past, in their nihilistic pursuit of a post-modern dystopia or supra state? Is the present just a photo-opportunity for western leaders to boost their sagging poll ratings (I refer to the French and US president, here)? All this razzmatazz and spin can be dizzying for some observers or commentators of and on the international scene. Behind the backdrop of all these celebrations Europe is unravelling. It is in post-Euro crisis mode. Protests against unrelenting austerity, decrepit and corrupt monarchies (i.e. Spain) and technocratic and authoritarian rule have spread throughout the Mediterranean basin from Greece to Italy, to Spain and Portugal. Turkey too is engulfed in a bitterly violent and popular struggle to overthrow a tyrant. Moreover, the core countries of Europe are fed up with the dictates of Brussels' imperial order. Witness the rise of the "protest vote" in England (UKIP) and France (National Front), in last month's EU wide vote.

The results were indicative of the EU's citizenry's mood. There's utter disgust with and for the ruling elite and establishment. As in the late 1930's, a motley crew of unseemly "Populists", nationalist and extreme right, anti-immigrant (The first time in German post war history a member of the NDP or neo-Nazi party has been elected in an European parliament.) and retrograde eccentrics are coming to the fore. Anything goes, in a popular vote which has rejected wholesale "business as usual" in Brussels. What a circus the next sitting or session in Strasbourg will be!

In the "other Europe" things aren't much better if not worse. In Ukraine, fascist politicians whose forefathers became and collaborated with the Waffen-SS commandos in the form of "Right Sector" and "Svoboda" have come to power in an EU-US orchestrated and financed putsch in Kiev.

And now to add insult to injury a "Willy Wonka" chocolate king, and oligarch with not so clean hands, has been elected as new president. In this post-coup, post-presidential election era, Ukraine's response to Russian "hegemony" has been an "anti-terrorist" operation to quell "separatist fighters" seeking to break away from Kiev's rule. The US President for his part, while in Poland announced in Warsaw, on Tuesday, more military spending for Eastern Europe to help "new Europe" deal with the on-going and deteriorating rapidly, Ukraine crisis.

With an American fighter jet in the background, the US commander in chief promised to upgrade US military presence (army, navy and air force) in the region at a cost of one billion US\$ (735 million Euros). A pittance when compared to the trillions spent over the years on bailing out "too big to fail" and "zombie" banks in Europe and the US, since the 2008 financial crises. But nevertheless, hardly a trifling sum in an era of prolonged economic malaise and severe social deprivation.

Almost on cue on the same day in Brussels, in a show unity and of solidarity with Ukraine and "new Europe", NATO defence ministers met to discuss how the alliance can offset Russian influence in the eastern part of the now Balkanised and destabilised country. It's almost as if 25 years after 1989, new division from the past have reappeared. Or the new militarism has displaced the center of gravity of conflict further to the east. The new dividing line this time in Europe is the Dnieper and no longer the Oder River. Little has changed. The "whole and free Europe" rhetoric of yesteryear being echoed and feted in Warsaw or Paris must very empty or hollow in Kiev, Odessa or Donetsk these days. It's devoid of any substance or meaning. As once more Europe is engulfed in perpetual conflict, civil strife and again is cut into two parts as before.

Now let's take a closer and quick look at two institutions which shape and determine Europe's future.

NATO, Quo Vadis?

NATO as in 1989 today is searching for a new *raison d'être* to justify its own existence and ensure its survival into the future. After the Afghanistan debacle the Brussels based transatlantic alliance, needs to keep itself well funded or it will be out of business soon. NATO is in a fix. It can't enlarge further east to places like Georgia, Armenia or Ukraine for that matter, without risking a non-conventional war with post-Soviet "resurgent" Russia. And Iran looks like it can be tamed (to do the west's bidding) if given the proper enticements by the western powers. So any immanent NATO led first or pre-emptive strike against the Islamic Republic is "off the table" for a good while.

Furthermore, most of the 28 member NATO states or partners for their part are cutting back on defence. The alliance's leader, the US, is too, "downsizing" its military capability. The figures speak for themselves. In the past few years NATO member states cut military spending up to 40 percent. The UK in terms of its overall GNP spends only 2,4 percent on defence, Greece 2,3 percent, Estonia 2,0 percent. Germany is the lowest spender with 1,3 percent. Russia for its part after decades of stagnation in its armed forces has over the past five years increased defence outlays by 10 percent. Hence, an underfunded NATO after 25 years of expansion has overextended itself. The alliance took in too many and too quickly, new members at a time of great financial and economic distress within its ranks. In contrast, Russia profiting from an unprecedented oil and gas boom has filled its state coffers to the rim. And thus in the last decade has increased its military budget. For NATO, however, the Ukraine situation has given leaders on both sides of the Atlantic a pretext to boost military spending. So taxpayers, get ready to cough up more cash!

European Union, Quo Vadis?

Like NATO the EU also has twenty eight member states. However the EU after 25 years of deepening and widening is falling apart at the seams. The Eurozone crisis has left the EU torn between a relatively prosperous north (Benelux, Germany and Scandinavia) and a very poor southern flank comprising the PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) which includes the Balkans as well (Bulgaria and Romanian).

This week in Vienna top diplomats from Southern Europe have come to consult with the EU counterparts. They are seeking assistance for the devastating floods which have hit the region this spring. But above all, states like Serbia are asking for reassurance that, like Croatia and Slovenia this ex-Yugo. Republic, will too join the EU soon. There's a hitch however. Like NATO, the EU is suffering from "enlargement fatigue" and can't take in new and relatively poor member states. The enlargement process is thus in limbo indefinitely. The future of Europe looks bleaker than it did in 1989, or 1944. The next commemoration this month likely to make headline, will be the day almost a hundred years ago when a shot rang out in Sarajevo, which was heard around the world. It seems Europe today is living in a kind of flashback mode, in a world of yesterday; or one which vanished with the start of the "Great War" in 1914, once again.

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