

The U.S. Pre-Eminence in Post-Cold War Europe: 1990-1991

Written by Iulian Toader

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IULIAN TOADER, DEC 3 2013

Following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, America faced new foreign policy challenges. The end of the Cold War implied rethinking a new security architecture for Europe in order to maintain stability, primarily by reducing the threats and risks that could affect international security. Moreover, the future of the international system was covered in uncertainty. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact would not dissolve themselves until the second half of the year 1991. Thus, the U.S. had to prudently manage the political situation in Europe, especially the political development of the countries newly freed from communism.

Following the fall of the Berlin wall, the main goal of U.S. foreign policy was to remain engaged in Europe and to lead the new transatlantic security architecture focused on the North Atlantic Alliance. America had rapidly chosen to lead the new international system and to avoid a premature withdrawal from Europe. Immediately after the Malta summit in December 1989, George Bush announced his vision regarding the future of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture:

“I pledge today that the United States will maintain significant military forces in Europe as long as our allies desire our presence as part of a common security effort. As I said at NATO earlier this year, the United States will remain a European power. That means the United States will stay engaged in the future of Europe and in our common defence” [1].

The vision proposed by the Bush administration, known as the New Atlanticism, tried to reconcile the European aim to foster the integration process and the American goal to lead a transatlantic security framework[2].

The American preeminence in Europe announced by George Bush was an essential element of the new world order. The United States had to remain in Europe for many reasons: to balance the Russian power, to pacify Europe, and to enlarge the democratic stability area towards East. Furthermore, the American presence in Europe was seen as a stability factor. In June 1990, during the Washington summit, Bush asserted:

“We hope a continued U.S. presence there will be seen as something that’s stabilizing. And NATO is the existing machinery that we feel, with an expanded mission, can best provide that stability”[3].

President’s Bush main goal was to assure the preeminence of the Alliance in Europe and to prevent other European independent structures to emerge as a competitor for NATO.

The U.S. determination to persist engaged in Europe collided with Europe’s own ambitions to build their own security framework. This dissension had an important impact upon the debates regarding the process of redefining the Euro-Atlantic security in the next period. France established a goal to foster the European integration and acted in the first phase according to the De Gaulle doctrine, which advocated for a lower American influence in Europe[4]. Therefore, France often collided with the U.S. objective to lead the European security system after the Cold War.

France desired a broader and strengthened role for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and, at the same time, the development of a European security and defence identity. These were to be achieved by

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proposing the absorption of the Western European Union in the process of European construction, in order to function as the armed pillar of the European Union. Moreover, François Mitterrand proposed, as a personal project, to establish a European confederation with the aim to gather all the states of the continent in a joint and permanent organization[5]. Among other tasks, this confederation was supposed to fill up the security vacuum left over by the Soviet disengagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Mitterrand's project encountered a lot of skepticism and, consequently, the American alternative was preferred.

After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. goal was to maintain NATO's dominance in the European security architecture in order to link the two sides of the Atlantic. However, until 1989, NATO was thought as a mechanism against the Soviet Union. Once the enemy was gone, however, the continued relevance of NATO was brought into question and the new framework implied rethinking NATO's role. While the collective defence guarantees provided by article 5 still remained the fundamental pillar, it was necessary to reinforce the political element and to redefine the strategic concept of the Alliance, based on a new concept of security[6].

During the process of developing a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture in the post-Cold War era, the essential role was played by the North-Atlantic Alliance. The Alliance had to manage the new challenges determined by the Europeans desire to build their own Security and Defence Identity and by the security vacuum left behind by the withdrawal of the Soviets from the continent. Thus, NATO had to redefine its role and to adapt to the new international context after the end of the Cold War[7].

At the North-Atlantic Council meeting in Turnberry, Scotland, on 7 and 8 June 1990, Foreign Affairs ministers of the NATO Member States expressed, for the first time, the decision to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the reunification of the continent, which offered the chance to build a new stable order in Europe and a sustainable peace based on the western system of values[8]. In addition, NATO stated the intention to cooperate with the Soviet Union and with other European states. This intention was followed by the proposal initiated at the London summit in July to elaborate a joint statement with the Warsaw Pact Member States, in order to officially mark the end of the confrontation period[9]. The success in London motivated the American administration to start a more intensified transformation of the Alliance project, which went on to occupy the entire agenda of the discussions concerning the North-Atlantic security throughout the year 1991.

Finally, at the Rome summit, between 7 and 8 November 1991, the Alliance adopted a new strategic concept, based on a broader security approach. The new concept included the ethnic rivalries and the territorial conflicts from Central and Eastern Europe among the threats to the NATO Member States [10]. Despite the security guarantees provided by article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the new strategic concept highlighted the new challenges towards the international security which outstripped the framework of collective defence. In addition, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council was established as a dialogue and cooperation mechanism with the former communist states that did not, in fact, receive the security guarantees provided by article 5. However, this was the first phase in a longer process intended to bring the states from Central and Eastern Europe closer to the political and security structures of the Alliance. At the time, an enlargement of NATO was difficult to imagine and could have cancelled all the efforts undertaken to assure the stability on the European continent, as the Soviet Union had not withdrawn officially from the area. Neither the Alliance, nor the states from Eastern Europe were prepared to accomplish this phase[11].

The differences between the American and European visions in terms of relating to the new security architecture in Europe are harmonized by adopting the formula of "interlocking institutions." According to this formula:

"NATO, CSCE, the European community, the Western European Union and the Council of Europe have to complete each other"[12].

Thus, the European ambition to promote its own strategic vision of the post-Cold War era had limited results[13]. The U.S. decision to stay engaged in Europe centered the Euro-Atlantic security architecture on the North Atlantic Alliance under the leadership of America.

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After the bold changes faced by Eastern Europe during 1989, the American leadership in Europe was envisaged by Washington as a factor of stability; both for the future of Europe and for the international system. In the end, the European security system was transformed according to the terms agreed by the officials in Washington. As the American scholar Mary Elise Sarotte asserted, America had chosen to offer Europe a prefabricated multilateralism[14]. This multilateralism was anything else but a system that would assure U.S. preeminence in Europe.

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Date written: June 2013