

President George W. Bush and the “Other” Europe

By Tomas Valasek, Center for Defense Information

What will the Bush presidency mean for the world outside U.S. borders? Few places ponder the question with keener interest than the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Long in the shadow of their more prosperous cousins to the west, the former communist states are eager to shed the “transition” label they have worn for the past decade and join the European political and security landscape. In practical terms, they seek (and some already have gained) NATO membership as well as entry into the European Union.

While marching westward, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe cast nervous glances eastward, to Russia, where the new Putin administration has introduced a more aggressive policy toward its neighbors. It has strongly reiterated its opposition to NATO expansion and has put pressure on the former Soviet republics to join the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States. Central and Eastern Europe expects much of the new U.S. president: a strong lead in prodding a reluctant NATO to expand and a tough policy toward Russia to keep its resurgent foreign policy in check. The president-elect’s views on NATO expansion will be crucial—the alliance is to consider the next round of expansion in 2002, halfway through Bush’s term in office. But where do the former Warsaw Pact countries fit into the president-elect’s views?

Most media highlighted George W. Bush’s now infamous confusion of Slovakia with Slovenia but missed the president-elect’s statements on NATO expansion. In a campaign press release dated October 31, 2000, Bush promised to “advance the process of NATO enlargement”ⁱ at the next NATO summit in 2002. Preempting questions about Moscow’s opposition to NATO expansion, the president-elect also vowed that

“Russia must never be given a veto over NATO enlargement.”ⁱⁱ

But, as usual, the statements come with fine print. “Advancing” the process of NATO enlargement by 2002 does not necessarily mean expanding the alliance at that time. After all, it is not solely a U.S. president’s decision; 18 NATO allies must also give their consent. Moreover, after the Kosovo war, there is less enthusiasm in the United States—as well as in Europe—to add more members to what has proved to be an often divided alliance with a very lopsided balance of power. The United States carried out the vast majority of all combat strikes over Yugoslavia because few Western European allies had the necessary aircraft or bombs. The potential new members are a further generation behind the weapons systems used by Western Europe. That may not be a problem for the generally low-tech peacekeeping missions, in which all NATO membership candidates already participate, but Central and Eastern Europe would contribute only marginally to future combat missions. A recent Congressional Budget Office study commissioned by the U.S. Senate concluded that two of the new entrants, the Czech Republic and Hungary, are capable of only small contributions to the alliance, “smaller than even their relative size would suggest.”ⁱⁱⁱ

During NATO’s first post-cold war expansion in 1997, the candidates’ military capabilities were barely scrutinized. The Clinton administration presented the enlargement as a moral imperative and as a means of encouraging Central and Eastern European countries to resolve their historic problems. But the 1999 Kosovo war reminded NATO abruptly that it is, first and foremost, a military alliance. So in 2000, the candidates’ military capabilities again matter. A recent study by the Institute for



National Strategic Studies, a research arm of the National Defense University, has recommended that NATO should delay expansion until 2005 to let the candidates improve their militaries.^{iv}

There is also a real possibility that the pro-expansion fever in the Bush camp may cool. The president-elect has set out potentially contradictory priorities for himself. Bush has promised to expand NATO, while also consistently stressing that his defense and foreign policy will be based on U.S. “strategic interests” and will focus on the big countries, such as China and Russia. The problem is, U.S. interests may dictate a very different policy toward Russia than NATO expansion would imply. What worries the Central and Eastern European countries is that their own potential or actual troubles with Russia will not meet George W. Bush’s definition of U.S. “strategic interest.” In fact, in order to get Russia to concede on points of interest to the United States, such as de-alerting nuclear weapons, Bush may agree to close his eyes on issues of importance mainly to Central and Eastern Europe, such as Russia’s aggressive diplomatic offensive against Georgia or its de facto veto over NATO membership for the former Soviet Republics.

This horse trading is not new to American politics. Bush criticized Clinton’s concessions to Moscow and promised a harder line on Russia: “George W. Bush can be entrusted

with managing the U.S.-Russian relationship in a tough-minded way...,” his campaign said in an October 2000 press release. But this could be a mere election ploy—after all, in 1992 candidate Bill Clinton accused George Bush Sr. of being too soft on China’s violations of personal and religious freedoms, only to turn a blind eye to the same Beijing policies once in office, all in the name of preserving a good relationship with Beijing. The reality is that taking a hard line is much easier to do from the back benches than from the White House.

But there are substantive differences between the Clinton/Gore and Bush camps. Bush has less legacy of relationship with Russian authorities; there is no such thing as a Bush-Chernomyrdin commission. That may make it easier to make a break with past policies. Moreover, Bush has surrounded himself with defense and foreign policy advisers who are famous (or notorious) for having taken an extremely tough view of Russian intentions during their previous stints either in the Reagan or Bush Sr. administrations. An indication of how indulging Bush Jr. will be of Moscow’s views will come not so much over NATO expansion but more likely with regard to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Bush vows to proceed with plans to build a national missile defense system, regardless of Russian objections that

this would violate the 1972 ABM Treaty.

And there is another unknown variable in the NATO expansion riddle. The Republican Party, which will now control the presidency as well as both houses of Congress, does have a strong isolationist wing that may yet affect U.S. defense and foreign policy. More Republicans than Democrats voted against NATO’s first round of expansion in April 1998 (10 Republicans vs. 9 Democrats).^v And some of George W. Bush’s closest advisers have struck an isolationist tune on occasions: the best known instance is the statement by the future National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, who called for U.S. troops to be withdrawn from NATO peacekeeping operations in Europe.

For the past few decades, the isolationists among the Republicans have been a distinct minority, and it seems to be a general rule that the party in power tends to become more internationalist the longer it is in control. Whether the isolationists will have a significant impact on U.S. policies for the next four years remains anybody’s guess.

*Tomas Valasek <tvalasek@cdi.org>
is a senior analyst at the Center for
Defense Information in
Washington, DC.*

Endnotes

ⁱ “Governor Bush’s Policy on NATO and NATO Enlargement,” Press release, Bush-Cheney 2000, October 31, 2000. Published at www.expandNATO.org.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ “Integrating New Allies into NATO,” Congressional Budget Office, Washington, October 2000, p. 24.

^{iv} Jeffrey Simon, “The Next Round of NATO Enlargement,” Strategic Comment No. 176, October 2000, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington.

^v George W. Grayson, “Strange Bedfellows: NATO Marches East,” University Press of America, 1999, p. 208.