

# When the Free World Expands, So Should NATO

By Frederick Bonnart, International Herald Tribune

March 19, 1992

Doubts about the need for NATO in the absence of the palpable Soviet threat that caused it to arise may well endanger its future existence. In an election year, American politicians and the public appear to ignore its continued purpose and indispensability for the whole of the free world.

NATO remains the most cost-effective means of guaranteeing security. And it now has a chance to extend its protection and thereby its influence further East. The opportunity should not be missed.

Bitter fighting has erupted in Yugoslavia. The former Soviet Union is fragmenting, with some of the fragments more or less at war with each other. Not long ago, a serious crisis broke out in the Middle East which is not resolved; others, even more dangerous, remain serious possibilities. Beyond Iraq lies Iran, and beyond that volatile South Asia. The future direction of China cannot be predicted. And throughout the underdeveloped world, poverty and ignorance provide potential forces to be exploited by unscrupulous leaders. There can surely be no dispute that armed force is essential for the security of the democracies. It is merely a matter of how much and in what form.

In fact, NATO's common integrated military structure is only a framework in peacetime which would enable its members' national military forces to operate together in war. In comparison with national defense spending, it costs very little.

Before the beginning of perestroika, in 1985, the member countries spent \$358.4 billion on defense, or about 4.8 percent of gross domestic product. The European members, including France, spent about \$93 billion, or 3.3 percent of their GDP; the United States \$259 billion, or 6 percent.

Common NATO costs are included in these figures, but they are comparatively small. Total infrastructure costs since the program began in 1951 have amounted to about \$626 million a year. Operating costs for 1985 were about \$500 million; last year's figure was \$614 million. The Pentagon estimates NATO to cost it about 16 percent of its total budget.

It can be argued that even this is too much, and that the money would be better spent on economic, managerial and humanitarian aid as a means to achieve stability. Yet the new governments in Eastern and Central Europe, and those in the former Soviet Union, look to

NATO as their security anchor. They wish to join the alliance as soon as possible, and have in the meantime grasped at the association offered them under the newly formed North Atlantic Cooperation Council.

The council came into being in December as an extension of the liaison arrangements with the former adversaries that had begun after the declared end of the Cold War at the London NATO summit in 1990. Its purpose is to provide reassurance by consultation, and assist change by instruction. A recent meeting was attended by representatives of 19 of those governments, sitting together with the 16 NATO foreign ministers. The newcomers made their desire for full membership clear.

That step cannot be taken today. None of the countries concerned is sufficiently stable, nor are their democratic systems sufficiently firm. And there can be no question of admitting new members that are likely to war against each other - although membership has certainly helped in the past to reduce the intensity of disputes among members, and may have prevented open hostilities.

But action needs to be taken soon to make this extension possible.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland are on the verge of associate membership of the European Community. If they become full members it would be hard to refuse to admit them to NATO. This process could continue gradually as the republics stabilize and democratize their political systems. As their armed forces become part of a common defense, it will be possible to reduce them and consequently, also those of the present members.

The alternative is a reversion to national defense, unceasing mutual suspicion and secret arms buildups.

The nucleus of today's free world is formed by the United States and Europe, and NATO is its security arm. NATO is also the single institutional link between the United States and the West European countries. (The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe is not an institution in this sense.) And whatever may be the hegemonistic fantasies of some Pentagon officials, NATO operates on a basis of partnership and consensus. By incorporating the new democracies, it would become a mighty bulwark against the forces of superstition and prejudice that are the future danger.

The writer is editor of NATO's Sixteen Nations, an independent military journal published in Brussels. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

**A version of this article appears in print on March 19, 1992 in The International Herald Tribune.**