

If the Warsaw Pact is Past, Does NATO Have A Future?

By Richard Perle

What's going on today in the communist world? Is the Warsaw Pact past?

I think one has to begin with the center of the Warsaw Pact in order to approach an answer to that question, the Soviet Union itself. The single most important fact about the Soviet Union is the failure of its economic system. And together with that failure, which has been evident for some time, but acknowledged by the Soviet leadership itself only recently, has come the collapse of the doctrine that sustained, through three-quarters of a century, the subordination of the individual to the presumed needs of the state and the collective.

For about 75 years it was possible for the leadership in the Soviet Union to argue that in order to achieve material well-being it was necessary for individuals to sacrifice the right to speak as they thought, to read what they wished, to associate politically, to worship as they preferred, all in the interests of the material well being of the masses.

The failure of the Soviet economy has now made it clear that not only have these sacrifices not been justified by the results, but the reality is precisely the contrary of the communist doctrine. It is now obvious that only the opportunity for individuals in free markets and free political institutions can produce wealth and well-being to the mass of society. The successful economies of the world are those economies in which the individual is most definitely not subordinated to the state.

And with the collapse of that doctrine, and the relinquishment by the Soviets, as a consequence of their economic failure, of the willingness to use force to impose that doctrine beyond the Soviet Union, we have now seen breaking out throughout the communist world a demand for scrapping the system that has kept the people of Eastern Europe enslaved, in the last analysis, by the Red Army.

Contribution of Failure. Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev's contribution to the liberation of Eastern Europe, if one can put it that way, was not a desire to see change there. It was a decision not to use force to sustain bankrupt regimes. That decision in turn was a result of the economic failure of the Soviet Union and the need on the part of the Soviet Union for a relationship with the West that may offer some way out of that economic failure.

It is impossible now to imagine the Warsaw Pact as a cohesive fighting force in the sense in which those of us who have been involved in defense policy have for so long calculated the needs and requirements of Western defense.

Now, how did we get to the situation that has developed? Ironically, it was perhaps the strength and cohesiveness of the NATO alliance now threatened by these developments that helped bring them about.

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The fact that the United States and its Western European allies, while never quite meeting their own force goals, nevertheless managed, through the structure of the North Atlantic alliance, to maintain a level of defense that made it impossible for the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact to realize their ambitions through the use of force. At least it made it sufficiently risky so that they were not prepared to embark upon military adventure.

Coupled with military strength was political will. This was most recently and significantly demonstrated during the struggle in the early 1980s for the deployment of intermediate range missiles in Europe, which were subsequently withdrawn in the aftermath of the INF agreement. That was, perhaps, the last great struggle of the Cold War in the post-war period in which the very existence of the political cohesion of the alliance was threatened by controversy over the deployment of missiles in the alliance — in many ways against all odds.

Evil Empire. Added to that was the re-ignition of the ideological war between the forces of free institutions and free markets in the West and Communism in the East; the ideological war that was re-ignited by Ronald Reagan. Recall the speech about the Evil Empire. As one listens to speeches made today in the Congress of People's Deputies in the Soviet Union, one hears echoes of the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan just a few short years ago.

The Soviets themselves have declared that they once ran an empire, and on the evils of the Soviet system, one needs only to listen to Soviet commentators themselves. That ideological war was fundamental to the collapse of the doctrine of the subordination of the individual to the state and, in turn, has led directly to the situation — a very happy situation — that we now see.

It was not because of the liberals who were ready to compromise with the Soviet system out of a belief that that was necessary in order to prevent nuclear war that we have arrived at the situation that we now have. There were so many who would have abandoned the ideological struggle, who were ill-prepared or unprepared to maintain the military strength necessary to stay the course. Yet, as one reads the editorial pages of our great journals today, it is astonishing to read who is prepared to claim credit for the developments we now see in the Eastern bloc.

Imperfect Controls. Finally — because this remains a continuing issue — that one crucial element in the collapse of the Soviet ability to sustain massive military investment in the way that offered some possible benefit in the future, the thing that contributed significantly to the relative decline of the Soviet economy, by comparison even with the developing countries of the Pacific Basin, was a painful and difficult and imperfect system of controls on the transfer of advanced Western technologies to the Soviet Union.

I mention this because in the current euphoria, there are those who would dismantle that system of controls and facilitate the modernization of Soviet military power utilizing the most advanced Western technologies, and in a sense, diminish the pressure on the Soviet Union to continue both to tolerate reform in Eastern Europe and possibly even to allow reforms to go forward in the Soviet Union.

Now, what's going to happen in the Warsaw Pact? I think it is clear that, when freed from at least the immediate threat of the use of the Red Army to maintain the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, virtually every country in Eastern Europe is going to go its own way. One can no longer imagine a cohesive, integrated battle managed by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

Military budgets in the Warsaw Pact are likely to decline rapidly. Pressure is going to rise for the Soviet forces — forces that remain essentially occupation forces in Eastern Europe — to withdraw from Eastern Europe. As we contemplate the negotiations now underway in Vienna towards reduction in conventional forces in Europe, time is very much on our side. I think at this moment it would be a great mistake to accelerate the process. The pressure on the Soviets to leave Eastern Europe is going to mount a lot faster than pressures both in the United States and in some places in Europe for reductions in American forces.

Seeking Western Aid. And finally, the strong desire of the Eastern European countries for economic ties to the West is going to lead to a diminution of economic ties to the East. The Warsaw Pact will diminish as a supplier of military equipment to the Soviet Union. As it struggles to obtain Western assistance for its growth and development, we are going to see significant changes in the economic relationship. COMECON, in short, is going to go the way of the Warsaw Pact; that is, into a rapid dissolution.

Now, what about NATO, having helped achieve the success that we are now enjoying? I believe we are bound to see a rapidly diminishing role for NATO in the security policy of the United States and its allies; in short, in the policies of its own members. In fact, it's quite extraordinary how infrequently NATO is mentioned nowadays at conferences and meetings and gatherings of European political figures.

There is a great deal of talk about the European Economic Community, which is clearly the ascendant institution. Secretary of State Baker talks about a new political role for NATO, and others do as well. I rather suspect this is more nostalgia than reality.

Declining Relevance. Based on the hope that somehow the Atlantic Alliance will remain cohesive and integrated, one talks about a political role rather than a military role in recognition of the diminution of the military threat. It is, in reality, the military threat that has brought NATO together. And as that threat declines, the relevance of NATO will inevitably decline with it. I expect it will continue to serve a planning role. National delegations will continue to meet in Brussels to shape and try to coordinate their approaches to military security.

It is overly optimistic to think of a political role that seems far more likely to be inherited by the European Economic Community and by other organizations to which the Europeans have already turned to deal with the security dimension of East-West relations — institutions, feeble though they may be, like the Western European Union.

The future of NATO seems not a terribly bright one. It is significant that today at NATO headquarters, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze is a guest of the Secretary General of NATO. I can recall discussions just a few years ago about whether NATO should host Soviet representatives, and the decision was always against it. One cannot escape the conclusion that NATO members, whether they understand it or not, are looking for legitimacy by inviting the Soviet Foreign Minister to visit NATO headquarters. And if we're not careful, we will confer one last bit of legitimacy on the Warsaw Pact at the same time.

Political Differences. One of the reasons why I believe NATO will not play the political role that many of us would wish is that political differences that have been suppressed in the interests of a cohesive security policy, political differences across the Atlantic, are likely to increase in importance now that the sense of danger has diminished.

Everyone is familiar with those issues. They have to do with trade and protectionism, differences about issues outside the European area — Central America, for example. It was

always possible in the days in which the threat to Western security was real and imminent and growing to set aside those other differences in the larger interests. Now that that sense of danger is diminishing, we will see a much more open and vigorous debate over divisive issues within the alliance. That is one of the reasons why I rather doubt that NATO can play the political role that some would wish.

Disarming Again. Clearly, we are facing shrinking defense budgets in the West. I hope that the shrinkage is sensible, and recognizes the tentativeness of the changes that we have seen thus far.

Historically, this country has disarmed after every war, and it is entirely possible that we will repeat the mistakes of the past and disarm after the Cold War so thoroughly that we will create the foundations for the instability that may lead to the next war.

Clearly, defense budgets are going to come down not only in the United States but in Europe as well. We should pay close attention as we make decisions about those budgets to the continuing massive Soviet investment in military power.

The discussion that we have heard in Moscow – the statements that have been made by Soviet leaders about the future of the Soviet defense budget – are not encouraging. Not only because the figures that they routinely give us are wrong, but because the percentage decreases are rather modest and almost negligible against the baseline figures which are clearly false. The Soviets, by calculations that are worth serious attention, are spending as much as a quarter of their gross national product on the military.

The prospects for modernization of nuclear forces in Europe are practically nil. I don't lament that as much as some other people do, because I believe we have an adequate nuclear posture in Europe. The combination of U.S. central strategic nuclear forces and existing nuclear forces in Europe, if they are permitted to remain there, are adequate to provide the deterrent that we will need well into the next century.

It would be a profound mistake to quarrel divisively over the replacement of a single, relatively unimportant short range missile, the LANCE, and embroil NATO in what could be its last controversy, when it's hard to demonstrate that there is a serious requirement for that particular weapon system. So I would hope that we would accept that our existing nuclear posture is likely to be adequate, especially if we see a decline in Warsaw Pact forces on the scale that I expect is likely to occur.

Comfort Level. There will be American withdrawals from Europe. I don't think there's any doubt about this. The only uncertainty is the extent of those withdrawals. It is possible today to contemplate the withdrawal of even quite sizable numbers of American forces from Europe without the risk of the destabilization that would have taken place just a few years ago, when an American withdrawal, and in particular a unilateral American withdrawal, would have seriously shaken the confidence of our allies in the strength of the American commitment to the defense of Europe.

Europe has discounted American withdrawals by now. The comfort level, with the prospect of those withdrawals, is sufficient so that they can take place without pulling the political props out from under a common sense approach to Western security, which is going to persist whether NATO as an institution is in the forefront or not.

I won't hazard a guess about the future of Germany, except to suggest that the outflow that we have seen in recent weeks is almost certain to continue. Some Germans as well as others took comfort when the massive outflow subsided after the Berlin Wall came down.

But it's an extraordinary thing. Something like 60 percent of the population of East Germany has, in a few short weeks, visited West Germany. They will go back changed, changed by the reality of what they see and feel and taste. And as they go back, they will contemplate whether to remain or whether to go.

I can't believe that there will not be millions of East Germans who must have heard their parents, in some cases their grandparents, lamenting the fact that they failed to go when there was an opportunity to go before the Wall went up in 1961. And in tens of thousands, indeed, probably in millions of East German homes even now, one imagines the decisions being made to leave East Germany for the West while it is possible to do so. The rate in recent days has been roughly 2,000 a day, 700,000 a year.

Extreme Conjecture. The salience of the question of the reunification of Germany may diminish along with the Warsaw Pact threat as the population moves from East Germany to West Germany and it becomes less relevant whether they're unified or not. It is extreme conjecture to try to anticipate the mercurial sentiments of the German people in how they will respond to developments like the outflow that I anticipate in coming months and years.

There is one great, unwritten chapter to this saga. This has to do with the failure of perestroika, the failure of Gorbachev's effort to build an economic structure that can produce goods and services on the scale of a modern industrial economy.

If I had to guess, I would guess without joy that perestroika will fail. The enormity of the task is simply too great. Three-quarters of a century of the destruction of private initiative and the willingness to take risks, the destruction of a system of rewarding performance and the substitution of a system that rewarded party membership, has so depleted the capacity of the Soviet people to respond to this challenge that Gorbachev will not succeed.

If he fails, it's impossible to imagine what will come after. One hasn't the slightest idea. With the passage of time, a year or two at most, it seems unlikely that even a restoration of a very tough regime in the Soviet Union could reimpose on the people of Eastern Europe the system under which they were forced to live all these many years.

Beyond Superpower Control. I certainly don't want to leave the impression that one can be certain about these developments as I've tried to project them. Clearly, we're in for a period of extraordinary turbulence, a period of perhaps greater turbulence than we've seen at any time in the post-war period. And the events that are driving the history at this moment are largely beyond the control of the individuals who lead the superpowers.

I wrote a piece the other day about the meeting at Malta, in which it seemed to me that the metaphor for Malta was the two leaders on their ships unable to get together to meet because of heavy seas over which they had no control. The world is heavy seas over which they have little control, and the future is going to be decided by people, many of them admirably courageous, in the countries of Eastern Europe, who have been demanding an end to control of the Warsaw Pact. In practical terms, they are achieving that, even as I speak.

