

Bush Missed Opportunity at NATO Summit

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The just-concluded NATO summit in Prague was one of the most important and fateful gatherings since the alliance's founding in 1949, for obvious reasons and less apparent ones.

On the surface, it was a historic celebration. The addition of seven former Soviet satellites completes the reintegration of these states into a "Europe whole and free." More than that, it fulfills NATO's bold, idealistic mission to create a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Europe free of mortal threats from within and without.

But the Prague summit was also a historic opportunity to go beyond enlarging the membership and to redefine the alliance's meaning in the post-Cold War era. And it was a chance for the United States, as the most influential member of NATO, to patch up some of the fissures that now threaten our most important alliance.

To my regret, that moment came and went unseized. In his speech to the summit on Wednesday, the president said some encouraging things about America's commitment to European security. But what went unaddressed was a far more important question for the future: whether the NATO these new members will join will be a strong, cohesive, permanent alliance that acts together or an increasingly disputatious group of nations that form fleeting case-by-case coalitions.

Right now, the trend lines are pointing in the latter direction, putting NATO in decline and at risk of disintegration. That would be terrible for both the United States and Europe. We need to have a full and open dialogue about the severity of the cracks in the alliance and what it will take to fix them. We can and must have conversations about future strategy. But those conversations will be moot if we do not deal with the real and consequential policy disagreements between America and our European allies.

The fact is many in Europe are troubled by the Bush administration's tendency to go it alone and dismiss the needs and concerns of Europeans in everything from trade to security, from the environment to international law. Hildegard Dukes, a German citizen, clearly spoke for many in saying, "I'm not anti-American. I'm grateful for what America did for us in the past. But America is acting strangely, and it gives me the creeps."

This is a troubling attitude, which, if allowed to deepen and spread, can truly distance us from our closest allies. The bonds of trust and good will that are essential to sustaining our alliance are already strained. And if the president continues to send the message through words and deeds that he views NATO as a convenient adjunct to American-made decisions rather than an irreplaceable community of free nations to which the United States -- with all of its power -- belongs, we will do permanent damage to ourselves. America's security requires a strong, reliable alliance with Europe, not just sporadic relations with European allies. NATO is the world's most successful military alliance not just because it defended Europe from the Soviet Union, but because it was a coalition of like-minded and like-valued nations, nurtured and strengthened by an institutional system of cooperation across national borders.

The result was a stable environment in Europe made possible by the trust that came from working together so often for so long. Without NATO, there would not

have been a European Union. The question now is whether without the Soviet threat, there will continue to be a NATO alliance.

Reconfirming the U.S. commitment to NATO and rebuilding the trust of our European allies are the president's most critical tasks following Prague. As strong as we are, we still need their support. We have seen that in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in response to Sept. 11. For 50 years, we assumed that America would be called on to defend Europe; but we can never forget that Article V of that charter was first invoked in 2001 to enable NATO planes and NATO crews to patrol American skies while U.S. troops destroyed the Taliban in Afghanistan.

For us to continue to count on that support, particularly as we confront global terrorism, President Bush must reverse the unilateralist course he has pursued in foreign policy for two years and revive the great American tradition of international cooperation and leadership.

Rhetoric alone will not suffice. The president must demonstrate understanding and compromise on issues of great importance to the Europeans and other friends around the world, such as climate change, the **international criminal court** and key arms control treaties that separate us from our closest allies and put us on the wrong side of history.

It's not easy to change behavior, let alone beliefs. But unless President Bush shows Europe that he intends to do so, America's tactical victories at Prague will be transitory, and this expanding alliance will in time become a hollow shell of the unique partnership that brought Europe and America to victory in the Cold War.