

ANIMUS IN CONSULENDO LIBER – V PREMIŠLJEVANJU SVOBODEN DUH

ANIMUS IN CONSULENDO LIBER – A MIND UNFETTERED IN DELIBERATION

Povzetek Preteklo je 15 let, odkar se je Slovenija z nekaterimi drugimi državami pridružila Natu. Tako politične elite kot navadni državljani razumejo organizacijo Severnoatlantske pogodbe kot zaščitnico. Toda pred kom ali čim nas mora Nato zaščititi? Zakaj so se Slovenija in druge države iz nekdanjega komunističnega bloka pridružile zavezništvu? Kakšno je njegovo resnično stanje? Namen tega prispevka je pogled na Nato z vidika izkušenj, pridobljenih v 12 letih na treh različnih položajih v Natovem poveljstvu.

Ključne besede *Nato, soglasje, član, diplomacija.*

Abstract It has been 15 years since Slovenia, alongside several other countries, joined NATO. Both political elites and ordinary citizens see the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a protector. However, what does NATO have to protect us from? Why did Slovenia and the other countries from the former communist hemisphere join the Alliance? What are the realities of the organization? This contribution proposes a look at NATO from the perspective of 12 years of experience serving in three different positions at NATO HQ.

Key words *NATO, consensus, member, diplomacy.*

Introduction NATO's goals have varied throughout history, and have always been adapted to the circumstances in the course of the organization's existence. The initial goals, defined at its creation, have evolved or disappeared, and today's aims are considerably different. The question is whether the overall security situation has changed the organization, or whether the organization has exercised significant influence over the security surroundings.

In general, several important periods can be distinguished in NATO's development. While the first 40 years of the organization's existence were dominated by the Cold War *modus operandi* and a "simple" bipolar World, the next 20 – with my country, Poland, and Slovenia already having joined NATO – were marked by the expansion of tasks and operational engagement out of area (non-Article 5 operations), a gradual abandonment of static forces, a reduction in structures and defence spending in member states, and so on. At the time, a popular saying scattered across NATO corridors and meetings was: "either out of area or out of business". NATO was at the height of an identity crisis. Additionally, a preference for fostering deployable forces rather than building a new NATO defence infrastructure was all-encompassing. I remember our late Chief of Defence (ChoD) General Franciszek Gągor saying, "You need concrete to take off", during one of the NATO Military Committee ChoD sessions, in response to the ongoing discussion on limiting investment in NATO static installations and predominantly developing deployable forces.

Finally, the most recent period of NATO's growth, spreading over more than the last 10 years, has marked a gradual return to the roots of NATO, and thus the mission of collective defence in the fast-changing geostrategic situation.

While one can say that the very existence of NATO probably prevented the deterioration of the security situation in the treaty area, we should also stress that, simultaneously, the security situation within NATO's zone of influence has been shaped by the ever-evolving defensive capabilities of the Alliance and its democratic values.

1 WHY JOIN AT ALL?

The most important argument for joining a defensive alliance is to protect one's country against an external threat. This idea united most of the populations and political circles (even those opposing each other) from the accession countries, and finally prevailed prior to them joining NATO. Nevertheless, the process was in itself complicated. Initially, NATO was not widely open to further expansion. Some of the member states simply did not want to accept new countries into the NATO circle. Notwithstanding hardship, the candidates were able to prove that they were worth admitting and that the Alliance was also going to benefit from the expansion.

From NATO's perspective, the most serious threat to the democratic world was, and still is, invariably Russia. However, this perception varies in, on the one hand, countries remote from Russia, such as Portugal or even Slovenia and the other Balkan countries, and, on the other hand, Poland, and also Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, namely those countries at the Eastern flank, which are exposed to or even directly neighbour this threat. The fear of the Russian "bear" did not end in 1989. Is this the only reason for the accession of 13 (soon to be 14) new members since 1999?

At the time of the 1999 enlargement, many years had passed since the previous expansion (the last country to have joined NATO was Spain, in 1982) and the member countries had forgotten all about it. An additional layer of complexity was added by the fact that this time it concerned states from the former communist bloc, which had been strongly linked to or, for some, even part of the Soviet Union before its disintegration in 1991 (with Russia as its legal successor). When our countries joined, in fact in batches (in 1999, 2004, 2009, 2017 respectively), they simply wanted to escape the geostrategic vacuum in which they no longer belonged to the Eastern sphere of influence but were not yet part of the democratic world. No one likes to live in limbo or to constitute a “no man’s land”. It did not seem reasonable to remain within the shackles of the past with all the traumatic experience attached to that; naturally, falling within the zone of influence of stronger players was a much better choice.

Looking from the perspective of the last 15 years, one can see that the context of the Russian aggressive actions in Ukraine or Georgia gave us the reassurance that joining NATO was worthwhile. However, there has not been a proper verifying factor. The Russians did not attempt to attack any NATO state, but that is, paradoxically, the whole point. We can assume that this is the result of two important assets that the Alliance presents – deterrence and credible defence.

Let us imagine that a defined and specific threat like Russia does not exist. In the 1990s and today, most of our political class would still prefer integrating into the Western sphere of security. Decades of life under communism have fostered in us an incredible need to westernize and to make sure that we belong to the same zone every step of the way.

Were these the only flywheels that drove other potential NATO members? Even if we had not been threatened by any danger, we would still have joined the Alliance. Slovenia, not surrounded by any enemies or entities who would like to challenge the West, is a good example. It is noteworthy that within Slovenia there were no factors triggering the need for an external stabilizer like NATO, and yet the country wanted that membership. Its situation is similar to the most recent newcomer, North Macedonia, which wanted to confirm its place in what is broadly understood as Western Europe. Although the Balkans were perceived as a historically unstable region, the reason for joining NATO went deeper. It is the particular effect of the fall of communism in Europe; everyone wants to belong to the West, not to the East.

In addition to this, NATO constitutes a good driving force. It obliges members to modernize and develop in such a way that they do not feel too complacent. There is always room for improvement, modernization and transformation. The Alliance points out technological trends to its members, and teaches them about cyber threats or hybrid wars. Furthermore, being in NATO also carries a certain prestige and gives its members a sense of choice.

2 A BUMPY ROAD TO BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE CLUB

How difficult and uncertain were the roads and measures for the accession of our countries, including for Slovenia? It can certainly be claimed that the post-1999 opening to the whole group of former communist countries was the result of a very long and complex process that paved the way.

At the beginning, a spearhead in the form of Czechia, Hungary and Poland was trying very slowly to open the door to NATO. It is not an overstatement to say that we were not wanted. Later, it somehow became a little easier. This does not mean that it was altogether easy, or that accession was automatic. However, through our persistence, we kept one foot in the door in order to keep it ajar for the next arrivals. Progressively, better and less ambiguous procedures and expectations were outlined for such an event.

Earlier, picturing the group of countries from our region as part of NATO was simply a disturbing vision. We were considered unreliable; only as trustworthy as post-communists can be. We were a potential burden to the Alliance. Opponents of our accession were aware that we would not facilitate the defence of NATO, but would only make it more difficult, especially at the beginning. We would not increase the Alliance's combat potential at once, and territorially we would induce its extension, and consequently weaken it. We were, in a sense, worsening the security situation "well set" in the Cold War paradigm.

On 20 December 1991, the Allies established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in order to create a space for dialogue and collaboration with NATO's former Warsaw Pact counterparts. "The NACC was a manifestation of the 'hand of friendship' extended at the July 1990 summit meeting in London, when Allied leaders proposed a new cooperative relationship with all countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the end of the Cold War" (NACC, 2017). The existence of the NACC was the impulse for the creation of a "light involvement", in the form of the Partnership for Peace (PfP, 1994) as a practical programme that would transform the relationship between NATO and the participating states. This was also a test for the newcomers to prepare them for practical cooperation within NATO.

The PfP constituted a kind of 'sandpit' or hallway of NATO: »Show us how you're doing in the kindergarten, maybe we'll let you into the serious adult organization,« or »Stay in the hall for a little bit before entering the parlour«. We were patiently, although reluctantly, staking out. We showed that we were worthy of joining the big league. Paradoxically, today, Russia is also a member of the PfP, alongside such countries as Ukraine and Georgia. So what is the stand of NATO and the countries directly suffering from Russia's aggressive behaviour on its participation in the PfP? Are we still trying to play the conciliator's role?

In the end, what changed the opinion of the entire NATO community and gave the final push to open the door? A breakthrough in the way the West was thinking about NATO enlargement very possibly came from the geostrategic calculations that played a crucial role. It is always better to have the borders of the security zone moved ~600-700km to the East. But that was not the only reason. It is likely that the prospect of potential economic gains in this part of Europe was also a factor. Once the doubts of some countries were dispelled, a consensus on enlargement could finally be reached.

3 WHAT DOES NATO PROTECT US FROM?

NATO analyses potential threats and challenges. While some of them do constitute a direct threat to certain countries, this is not really the case for others. Today, NATO countries are particularly afraid of, for example, terrorist attacks, because for various reasons they might become possible targets themselves. The Mediterranean countries, Slovenia included, are not particularly afraid of the threat emanating from the East, because they are not directly exposed to it. Likewise, Poland is not disturbed by the problems in the Mediterranean, because it does not belong to this region. Unwanted immigrants, Islamic State or the crisis in the Middle East are not priority threats for certain countries.

For this reason some joint activities aimed at solving these problems should rather be seen as a manifestation of Allied solidarity and reciprocity. Members give their support to the general direction of these activities, and provide advice and physical backing, but they are not particularly active in seeking to solve these specific problems.

4 WHO CAN WE COUNT ON?

NATO increases the defence capabilities of its member countries. All the members are 100% convinced that they would not be able to defend themselves against potential aggression from Russia (with the possible exception of the US). Some even say that dealing with aggression coming from smaller countries would turn out to be problematic. Only external help and support could save an attacked state in the situation of a protracted conflict. In this context, one question inevitably remains: can we count on all members of the Alliance when the time comes?

Theory and practice do not necessarily go hand in hand. Theoretically and officially we can count on the help of all member states and their military (and economic) might as one united institution and Alliance. However, we, i.e. those of us in the Eastern part of Europe, do not necessarily think that certain powerful European countries, even neighbouring ones, would help us individually in the event of Russian aggression, and even if they did, their individual help would not be sufficient. Hence, in practice, our hopes and calculations mainly rely on American

help. WWI and WWII are the best examples of this transatlantic help. Indeed, one can clearly feel that the hopes of some governments are located in the United States. This is manifest in these countries' everyday politics, which encompass various areas of interest going beyond the security sector. It is interesting to note that one of the informal meanings of the NATO acronym, used as a gentle tease in certain meetings, is "Need America To Operate". This does not call for any further explanation.

5 A SPLIT MEANING OR NOT?

As if contradicting the very idea of an Alliance, NATO functions as something that I call a "terminological dichotomy", and I am not only thinking of the two official languages, namely English and French. This duality has several dimensions.

Firstly, there is the very nature of NATO. Although in the perception of its potential adversaries NATO remains a military organization only, it is, in fact, a political-military alliance. This is why the two most important collegial and decision-making bodies at the top of the Alliance are the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the military authorities, the latter, paradoxically, consisting of three separate bodies: the Military Committee (MC), the Allied Command Operation (ACO), and the Allied Command Transformation (ACT).

Secondly, there is NATO's "dual personality". NATO should not be seen as yet another international organization, but rather as an Alliance of the richest (and strongest) countries in the world. NATO as an international organization (and therefore the "framework" only – the NATO Command Structure has less than 10 thousand soldiers) might not strike its observers as representing the importance and strength of the defensive force that the idea of the Alliance bears (~3.2 million troops) (see 'Defence Expenditure...', 2019). In other words, we may have a small organization, but a huge Alliance nonetheless. We must, however, concede that NATO is a relatively small organization to deal with macro issues.

As such, it represents an elite and is egalitarian at the same time, as it includes less prosperous countries with smaller armed forces (or without one at all – Iceland). The collective defence spending indicates its wealth; NATO estimates that the total of all member states' defence budgets was about €900 billion in 2018 (see 'Defence Expenditure...', 2019). In comparison, the numbers deflate drastically if we only take into account the organization's civil and military budgets – €1.65 billion – and its NATO Security Investment Programme (NSIP) – €700 million (see 'NATO agrees...', 2019 and Haltiwanger, 2019).

Within the Alliance, we are dealing not only with the reconciliation of external security interests in accordance with democratic standards, but also with the divergent interests of the member states, which are not always in unspoilt, friendly relationships.

NATO is a melting pot where subtle diplomacy – embodied by the presence of several thousand diplomats and even statesmen (occasionally including Heads of State and Government) – meets the brute force resulting from its military nature and the capabilities it exemplifies.

The Alliance is also about empathy, tolerance, sensitivity and willingness to help others, which, paradoxically, are carried through power and even violence represented by NATO armed forces.

NATO's "dual personality" is also apparent in its operations. NATO is mainly associated with the well-known Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which in its most general outline introduces the principle of solidarity and collective defence between members, already described at the time of Alexander Dumas and his Three Musketeers in »all for one and one for all«. However, there are also operations meant to bring peace, sometimes far away from the Alliance's treaty boundaries, which are known as non-Article 5 operations (see The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949).

Another example of NATO's duality lies in the fact that it is not only about the collective defence embodied in the principles of Article 5, but also about the responsibility of the allies to build their own defence. This aspect can even be seen as self-defence resulting from Article 3 of the Treaty (Ibid., 1949).

NATO as an organization applies standards, but it also respects the diversity resulting from the legacy of the States' internal systems, and affordability relating to the variability in wealth and development of the individual members.

NATO reflects the polarization materialized in military realism vs. the excessive optimism of diplomats and their tendency to use the armed forces, or vice versa. On the other hand, in NATO we have political and civilian control over the enthusiasm of military skirmishers.

It would be difficult not to mention the sadness and sorrow caused by the deaths that have occurred in NATO operations, but neither could we omit the joy resulting from having been able to prevent some human suffering in different parts of the world.

6 MYTHS OR TRUTHS ABOUT NATO

Ironically, many myths have surrounded the functioning of such a serious organization. Most of them should be dispelled and rejected. A good number of these myths originate in a lack of inside knowledge of the organization, or are spread by people who manifest a marked scepticism towards its very existence.

Although it may seem surprising and even shocking, NATO does not have a single and only boss. The head(s) of NATO are its 29 member countries, and a specific

type of board of directors, which takes all its decisions by consensus. This does not mean that NATO's Secretary General does not have any role to play. The Secretary General is the organization's plenipotentiary with the authority to act on its behalf, as well as to implement all decisions taken jointly, but they do not have the power to make decisions on their own. Although they do not have voting powers, they might, in practice, inspire, motivate, push or even tip the scale by their actions.

NATO as an organization does not have much money; it is not a wealthy organization. Its budgets come from the contributions paid in instalments by the member states. As mentioned above, the real financial strength of the Alliance lies in the sum of the defence budgets of all the member countries.

As such, NATO does not have its own, ready to use, armed forces. Rather, it has an organizational framework of the command structure, numbering no more than 10,000 staffers. The strength of the Pact is, yet again, the sum of the components brought in by the member states. In this case, the sum of their respective armed forces appears in the eyes of the Alliance's potential adversaries as the "sum of all fears".

In the same vein, NATO as an organization does not possess armaments and equipment. The rare exceptions comprise 14 AWACS aircraft (see AWACS, 2019), several UAVs (see AGS, 2019), and radar, sensors and installations related to NATO infrastructure. The real "heavy metal" weaponry is, once again, in the possession of the member states.

There is another methodological mistake in our way of thinking about NATO, especially in societies that had to work hard to »deserve« their membership. We often hear that »NATO told us to do this and that« or that »NATO requires so-and-so from our country«, etc. Nothing could be more misguided. NATO is about us, and if we disagree, the other members are not able to force us to do anything we do not want or are not able to do.

7 IS NATO A "TALKING SHOP" ONLY?

Another witty meaning of the NATO acronym is "No Action, Talks Only". This misconception undoubtedly falls under the list of myths about the organization, though admittedly this might have been the state of affairs during the Cold War. The logic behind such an attitude is easily understandable: it is always better to talk (e.g. on the basis of Article 4 of the Atlantic Charter, which comes down to consultations relevant to the Alliance) rather than to shoot at each other. Paradoxically, the "talks only" posture ended when NATO began to implement its non-Article 5 operations. Although there is much room for improvement in NATO proactivity – rather than reactivity – it seems that nowadays it is more appropriate to translate the acronym of NATO as "Now Action, Talks Over". There are various ways in which NATO has demonstrated that action is part of its core business.

Its activities relating to threat analysis, appropriate capability building, advanced planning, striving for interoperability, maintaining readiness and, finally, acting when necessary, all show that NATO's efforts have greatly surpassed those of pure "talk".

8 CONSENSUS – STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS?

Not only do "the mills of God grind slowly", but also NATO's decision-making process could constitute another example of its dual personality. It can be as time consuming as it is, euphemistically speaking, deliberate. When a given situation allows for some leeway in terms of time, seemingly trivial items can stay on the organization's agenda for years. On the contrary, in the event of an urgent need, decisions are taken quickly. A cascade decision-making system and a large number of committees favour this approach. Either way, the principle of consensus occupies a central place in the overall process. Should the consensus rule be considered as a strength or a weakness of the Alliance? Consensus must be reached for every NATO decision. Each country has an equally strong voice, which can trigger such situations as, for instance, the long-term blocking of North Macedonia's accession due to the well-documented disagreement on the name of the country. Nevertheless, it shows the high level of sovereignty that this organization leaves to its members. The unanimity rule is meticulously followed. Of course, as everywhere, there is strong pressure on the "opponents", but ultimately every member retains the right to a sovereign national position.

Consensus can, on the one hand, be considered a weakness. It can be a burden which weighs on the Alliance. In contrast, no comparable constraint encumbers, for instance, Putin's actions. On the other hand, the consensus is NATO's strength. Once all member states grant a motion, everybody defends such a decision individually, regardless of how turbulent the negotiations were and how much diplomatic effort had to be carried out.

It is almost proverbial, but if you cannot reach consensus negotiating at the table, you have to act unofficially, behind the scenes. In other words, corridor diplomacy also plays an important role in the Alliance's decision-making process. To paraphrase, the Partnership for Peace sometimes stands, in NATO slang, for »Eating for Peace« or »Drinking for Peace«. This clearly shows that formal receptions and dinners are more than mere courtesy meetings and may significantly influence certain decisions of the organization. Therefore, when asked about the time spent working for the Alliance, some people give the amusing answer of "5 or 10 kg" as an indicator of their civilian and military diplomatic experience within NATO.

9 IS NATO CHANGING FAST ENOUGH?

Probably not. I do not think, however, that this is a feature peculiar to NATO, but is rather a characteristic of all organizations with a global reach. Like others, NATO often faces criticism related to its slowness, excessive bureaucracy, oversized aspirations, and so on.

On the surface, NATO is conservative. While it is indeed stable, contrary to appearances it is under constant transformation. It even has a strategic command (ACT – Allied Command Transformation) responsible for this on-going transformation, like a watchdog monitoring the requirements and proposing adjustments in accordance with its motto: “Improving Today, Shaping Tomorrow, Bridging the Two” (see ACT, 2019). NATO embodies this never-ending transformation not only because the international security situation is changing dynamically and because there is an urgent need for rapid adaptation; it also changes by adjusting, for example, to the external economic environment, technological progress or even the arrival of new members, who bring a new, regional perspective to the table, sometimes from a completely different angle.

The NATO phenomenon

Participation in the North Atlantic Alliance represents prestige and keeping up with technology as well as military trends and doctrines.

In my view, NATO is a real cradle of strategic thinking and the best “defence university” one can imagine, where the only graduates are the few lucky ones – appointed civilians or military personnel – who have had the opportunity to scroll through its corridors and conference rooms. It is also a great diplomatic academy, a real life course of diplomacy of the highest level, very different from classical bilateral diplomacy and the highest-level school of democratic and civilian control over the military. Additionally, it is also a school of strategic patience, due to the specificity of the decision-making process.

NATO is an amalgam, a combination of the glow of diplomatic parlours with the mud and sweat of the military training fields – and with the blood and suffering of those who died or were injured fighting for democratic values.

Has the Alliance been effective over the 70 years of its existence? If we were to rate it in absolute terms, i.e. of whether there was a war or not – it has certainly proved to have fulfilled its role. The apocalypse of a Third World War, a resort to weapons of mass destruction, and an attack from the side of powerful adversaries have been avoided. Quite idealistically, one can only hope that this situation will remain unchanged.

This can lead to one general conclusion: that the North Atlantic Pact should not only remain a political and military club, but that it must also continue its ongoing adaptation to the ever-changing international environment.

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