The Plasticity of Geopolitics

Notions of national security, most notoriously, have invoked realities and necessities that everyone is supposed to acknowledge, but also vague generalities about everything and nothing. Much of the rhetorical force and political legitimation expressed through modern discourses of security rests ultimately on this simultaneous appeal to the hard and the vacuous, the precise and the imprecise, the exaction of blood and sacrifice in the name of the grand generalization.

Robert B. J. Walker, 1997

“Love, Peace, and NATO”

From November 20 to November 22, 2002, 46 heads of state, 2,800 delegates, and 3,000 accredited journalists converged on Prague for the summit meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The alliance invited seven new members: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. It was a spectacular affair, involving not only the official summit meeting but also a range of supporting events organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private companies. Mingling with defense specialists were Central European leaders of civil society; former dissidents like Adam Michnik were drinking beer with prominent pro-NATO lobbyists. The tight security, provided by 16,500 Czech policemen and military personnel, 250 U. S. Marines, and sophisticated technology like 15 U. S. Air Force jets for the total cost of 620 million koruny (approximately $20 million U.S.), did not dampen the festive spirit. “Love, Peace and NATO” is the title that Timothy Garton Ash chose for his eyewitness account of the summit.
“NATO has become a European peace movement,” Garton Ash writes, “Imagine, that Europe is a place where wars don’t start. As John Lennon sang: ‘Imagine.”

Peace was indeed a key theme of the meeting. The celebratory speeches made little mention of military defense but revolved instead around the issues of common European identity and values. Vaclav Havel, the president of the host country, referred to the meeting as a kind of peace conference that finally ended World War II. Bruce Jackson, the director of the US Committee on NATO, a pro-expansion lobby group, said: “The year 1989 represented a moral revolution, not a political one, and this we must bear in mind. Today, all countries in the east cling to Europe more than ever: Democracy has a unique opportunity to control them from the North to the whole circumference of the Black Sea.” The president of Latvia, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, emphasized that NATO would bring its new members “the full sunshine of the liberties and rights that NATO has been defending so long.” The summit, she said, had been a “sign of hope” for any nation “that has expressed the desire to join those nations that hold the same values.” The atmosphere was exultant and emotional. The Estonian ambassador to NATO, Sulev Kannike, had tears in his eyes when Lord George Robertson officially issued the membership invitation. Reactions across Central Europe celebrated invitations to membership as the ultimate recognition and codification of the Western identity of the Central European states. Lietuvos Aidas, a Lithuanian daily, called the invitation a “transition from one world to another.” Lietuvos Rytas, that country’s main daily, proclaimed that “The clock of history in Lithuania has started showing real Western civilization time.”

The side events were likewise saturated with the imagery of European identity and values. For example, 180 university students from 35 countries were gathered at an army base 40 kilometers from the Czech capital for the Prague Atlantic Student Summit (PASS), which was a simulation exercise “conceived to help students understand the value of the NATO alliance and its future challenges.” The delegates represented the member and the accession states as well as such states as Macedonia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, which were hoping for invitations in the future. The delegates discussed topics like enlargement, terrorism, biological and nuclear weapons, and the possibility of war in Iraq. “We think that it is important that a new generation gets acquainted with the means and procedures of international life,” said Antonio Borges de Carvalho, the secretary general of the Atlantic Treaty Association (ATA), an NGO that had organized the event. “It is even more important now when people are on the street protesting against our values and our way of life.” “I believe it is a great...