Freudian Slip on NATO

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The 26 heads of NATO governments did not offer Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine at their April 2-4 Bucharest Summit. Instead, they declared, “These countries will become members of NATO.” The allied leaders left concrete steps until a December foreign ministers’ meeting or maybe until next April’s NATO 60th Anniversary Summit. For Georgia, the outcome was 50-50. For NATO, the Bucharest row over MAP bared a rent within the alliance that must be reconciled before there can be significant progress on enlargement—or anything else.

After the November 2006 NATO Riga Summit, Georgians hoped that they were on the fast track to MAP at the Bucharest Summit. However, during 2007, doubts emerged. The most cogent lament from NATO capitals was that Georgia was lagging on rule-of-law reforms. There was also the perennial concern about the protracted conflicts in the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And one often heard ever useful, “They are not ready.”

Then came the hubbub about November 7 when Tbilisi was riven by street violence, irresponsible broadcasting and a television station closure. This no doubt colored some western attitudes, but after the January 5, 2008 Georgian presidential election, talk of November 7 faded.

Doubt about MAP for Georgia emerged before November 7 and, during early 2008, Western European diplomats clearly characterized it as a manifestation of their own geopolitical angst.

On March 6, NATO foreign ministers met in Brussels to set the agenda for the Summit, but they failed to agree on MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. Emerging from the session, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said, “We must take into account Russia’s sensitivity and the role it plays…and France is not the only country wanting to maintain a relationship with Russia as a great nation.”

Two days later, German Chancellor Angela Merkel dashed to Moscow to be the first western leader to meet with Russian President-elect Dmitry Medvedev. Upon her return to Berlin, she tossed a grenade across Georgia’s path to NATO. Countries “enmeshed in regional conflicts,” Merkel said, “should not try to become members.”

It was a familiar theme, but Merkel’s timing and stridency shocked. Some wondered whether the Russians threatened or enticed her. Three weeks before the NATO Summit, others asked if Merkel was signaling US President George W. Bush to drop the matter of MAP for Georgia and Ukraine before Bucharest. Either way, Merkel’s statement appeared to be a stalking horse for the Russian veto that NATO leaders so ardently deny.

Even that ugly intimation failed to deter France from piling on.
"We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine," French Prime Minister Francois Fillon said April 1 on France-Inter radio, "because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia."

Fillon’s words were likely a parapraxis, otherwise known as a Freudian slip. The French prime minister revealed what many have suspected for some time—some Western Europeans cling to a Cold War concept of NATO and a 19th Century notion of balance of power in Europe.

Neither the French Foreign Ministry in Paris nor French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Bucharest clarified Fillon’s statement. Moreover, a number of Western European countries were content to hide beneath French diplomatic petticoats.

The upshot was an intense argument among allies in Bucharest. Bush and Polish President Lech Kaczynski, backed by most of the post-Cold War NATO allies, Canada and Denmark, refused to drop the matter of MAP for Georgia and Ukraine.

The able Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer guided NATO to the compromise declaration.

Of course, there is no time associated with the promise of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, but the declaration will be sufficient to propel the matter forward.

However, to confront MAP for Georgia and Ukraine, the alliance must face the conceptual fissure that underlies the argument over MAP. In this regard, Fillon’s parapraxis may prove beneficial. So long as NATO leaders can tarry over their concerns about Georgia and Ukraine, they can sidestep the more important but tougher discussion. However, Fillon’s talk of a balance of power with Russia framed the debate.

Is NATO to be a military alliance to defend against armed attack on Europe, coordinating with the Americans action on backyard matters like the Balkans and balancing its relations with Russia, the other great power in Europe?

Or is NATO to be the preeminent 21st Century security organization, meeting threats wherever they arise and whatever their nature, cooperating with global partners, reaching to the south and east from the widest possible European democratic base?

In the latter case, balancing power with Russia would be irrelevant because, as Bush said in Bucharest, “The Cold War is over; Russia is not our enemy.”

There will be heated, difficult discussion, but NATO will find its way, and that way will pass through Georgia and Ukraine.

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