

# 'ONLY FREEDOM CAN WORK SUCH MIRACLES'

## Strong alliances protect European democracies

By **Ovidiu Dranga**, Romanian ambassador to Poland

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on targets in the United States, the world witnessed an unprecedented wave of sympathy for America. In Romania, as in France, Germany, Japan, Poland and South Korea, people spontaneously expressed their unconditional solidarity with the families of those killed or wounded in what was a sophisticated, large-scale operation perpetrated by foreign citizens on American soil for the first time since Pearl Harbor. The world was in shock at the inconceivable — a strike against the world's superpower had happened in front of their very eyes. For the first time in its history, NATO activated Article 5 as it prepared for the war against terror.

The moral and operational grounds of U.S. leadership for what was to become a new crusade against evil, and one of its most insidious manifestations in modern times, have been unquestionable. Allies and future allies, friends and partners of America worldwide understood that this was the moment for action to protect the international community from what was widely acknowledged as a threat to our way of life, to universal values and to our common future. It was clear to everyone that participating in the coalition against al-Qaida was an investment in their own security and that being part of a coalition of more than 20 like-minded countries was also a contribution to a common, much larger good. The enemy was identifiable, and the solution was in reach and achievable. At least in theory.

Since then, many things have changed. An economic crisis has created worldwide turbulences, and a new one is looming. Russia has become more assertive and more aggressive, and China has risen as a strategic competitor to the U.S. The United Kingdom has left the European Union, and the tensions among EU member states over money, influence and the redistribution of power within the union have become difficult to deny. NATO and the EU have accepted new allies and partners who legitimately aspire to a stronger role in decision-making, in



Polish soldiers gather for a ceremony welcoming NATO Enhanced Forward Presence troops to Orzysz, Poland. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

line with their increasing contributions to Euro-Atlantic security and prosperity. Last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on institutions, countries and ordinary people like never before in peacetime. Against this background, voices have grown louder in advocating a new approach toward U.S. engagement and commitments abroad, especially in Europe. What will come next?

As far as Europe is concerned, the answer may be easier. Europe needs America. A stable, secure and prosperous Europe remains inconceivable without a U.S. commitment to its security, redefined today as resilience in coping with multifaceted military and nonmilitary challenges. A strong American defense and economic presence in Europe guarantees that discussions about Europe's strategic autonomy will remain rather philosophical. Consequently, foreign enemies are deterred from interfering in European affairs — European elections and the

European economy included — with hidden agendas of hostile intrusion or strategic takeover.

The reason is simple. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, democracy appeared to have triumphed over tyranny in Europe, but, as we all know, nothing should be taken for granted. The U.S. retains the capacity to intervene and protect the continent not only from outside interlopers but also from itself, by simply being present and acting as a solution provider or facilitator. America is the only geopolitical player with Europe-related interests and responsibilities that maintains a global security posture enabling it to act, if necessary, as an honest broker in or as the ultimate defender of Europe. If Europe wants to stay at peace with itself and the world, while being globally relevant, it needs to stay closer than ever to America, given the unprecedented international challenges and the interdependence that lay at the core of the trans-Atlantic link.

But America needs Europe as well. Let's take NATO's example. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is part of an alliance system created by the U.S. to preserve peace and order in parts of the world that had been torn apart by prolonged conflicts, chronic instability and regional rivalries. NATO protected Europe from a Soviet invasion and then continued to maintain relevance after 1989 through swift adaptation to a new security environment. And Europe has been there for America in return. Mira Rapp-Hooper is right when asserting in *Foreign Affairs*: "The alliance system lowered the cost of U.S. military and political action worldwide. Since the early 1950s, U.S. treaty allies have joined every major war the United

States has fought, despite the fact that for almost all these conflicts, they were not required to do so by the terms of their alliances." But will this be the case in the future?

For Central and Eastern Europe, the answer is yes. NATO's eastern flank has become pivotal to the allied defense posture since the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea. Against the background of what might happen should the situation in Belarus further deteriorate, front-line allies such as Romania and Poland — with a credible deployment of U.S. troops in these countries — will play a crucial role in preventing escalation or even conflict. Moreover, meaningful U.S. support for subregional cooperation initiatives such as the Bucharest Format (B9) or the Three Seas Initiative would be an investment in regional stability that can really promote opportunities for peace and prosperity. In partnership with Washington, Bucharest and Warsaw could develop new, more effective capabilities of their own to manage regional challenges and consolidate their profiles in the West — particularly in Washington and Brussels — as dialogue facilitators, cooperation enablers, peace promoters and agents of positive change in Europe's eastern neighborhood.

In a recent Center for European Policy Analysis report titled "One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank," the authors concluded, *inter alia*,

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British Army Challenger 2 tanks arrive in Paldiski, Estonia, as part of the deployment of the multinational NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battalion, an initiative to deter Russian aggression on the Alliance's eastern flank.

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that “NATO should strengthen its deterrence posture in all domains and declare its capabilities across the entire Eastern Flank as FP [Forward Presence].” They also indicate as imperative “the establishment of joint multinational HQs that are focused on each of these regions [the Baltic and the Black seas] or, at a minimum, the establishment of appropriate intelligence fusion centers for the purpose of building situational awareness.” From a military standpoint, that would make perfect sense, but it might not be enough to deter strategic assertiveness or even aggression in the long run.

Military defense measures should be complemented by strategic economic endeavors meant to better integrate Central and Eastern Europe into global supply chains. They need to be redesigned anyway in the context of the ongoing pandemic to limit dependence on unreliable providers of energy, raw materials, health care equipment and essential spare parts for critical infrastructure. Relocating key production facilities from Asia to Central and Eastern Europe could solve some of the most pressing issues affecting manufacturing processes worldwide, such as the availability of qualified labor; security, quality control and proximity to destination markets.

Emerging economies such as Poland’s and Romania’s could be front-runners in this respect and turn into essential hubs for globalized innovation-powered industries and services, such as artificial intelligence, renewable (green) energy, bioagriculture, pharmaceuticals, dual-use high-technology research and development, aviation, cloud data storage and services, logistics and banking. In this context, it should be noted that experts such as Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olschaker recommend in *Foreign Affairs*: “Despite the higher costs that it would involve, it is absolutely essential that the United States lessen its dependence on China and India for its lifesaving drugs and develop additional manufacturing capacity in the United States itself and in reliably friendly Western nations.”

A new business model that combines low living costs, outsourcing and remote working in Central Europe is changing the perception tech giants such as Google or Oracle have of countries such as Poland and Romania. Accessibility for venture capital, global exposure and higher connectivity could indeed put Central Europe on the front lines of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Areas such as Iași (eastern Romania) or Rzeszów (southeastern Poland), have already benefited from business-friendly ecosystems created by local authorities, big private companies and public universities. High-technology hubs have thrived and attracted multinationals, but also small and midsize companies in search of young entrepreneurs who prefer to work from home at a time of accelerated digital transformation. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance and cost effectiveness of remote working will change the labor market for decades to come.

Due to some particularities and comparative

advantages that Central Europe still enjoys, the region could become the Silicon Valley of Europe, a “startup region” as some have started to call it. Freelancer.com director Joe Griston was right when he told the “Central European Processing” blog on ZDNet that “freelancing is gaining popularity and confidence from larger companies, bigger corporations and organizations.”

Defense-related companies have seized new business opportunities and opened production facilities in Central Europe or are considering doing so in the not so distant future, inspired by others’ success in a marketplace where dual-use products have been profitably promoted. Lockheed Martin produces dual-use helicopters in Poland, and Damen Shipyards, a Dutch company, has produced military and civilian vessels in Romania for more than a decade. Their presence and their success ensure that Central Europe is safe for strategic investment in new, key, global supply chains whose disruption or malfunction would create high-cost effects for any aggressor.

It is now commonplace to say that the nature of conflict is changing, that the world we live in is one in which the many threats to security and prosperity are nonmilitary in nature and that we must adapt to these new circumstances. What has not changed, and with luck will not change in the foreseeable future, is the power of trust and confidence in each other and the deep conviction that together we can do better if we share a set of values that have inspired and united us and our predecessors for a long time. This is what can make the difference in difficult times.

In *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes agree: “Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation cannot hope to defeat the West. What it does hope to do is to bring the West to the point of breaking into pieces, just as happened to the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself in 1989-91.” When reading that, I recalled the emotions I shared with thousands of fellow Romanians when we lit candles for those who perished in the 9/11 attacks or when, one year later, we listened under heavy rain to U.S. President George W. Bush’s famous “rainbow speech” in Bucharest’s Revolution Square, after Romania and six other nations had been invited to join NATO.

I cannot think of a better way to close than the words of Romanian journalist Cornel Nistorescu, who in September 2001, while watching a charity concert dedicated to the victims of the horrific attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., asked himself: “How could so many Americans be able to sacrifice themselves for their fellow humans? What on earth can unite the Americans in such a way? Their land? Their galloping history? Their economic power? Money? I tried for hours to find an answer, humming songs and murmuring phrases which risk of sounding like commonplaces. I thought things over, but I reached only one conclusion. Only freedom can work such miracles!” □