

# Back to Basics For the Alliance

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In recent weeks, lightning has crackled across the skies, illuminating, in its pitiless glare, the real shape of politics in Europe—the situation of the great powers in Bosnia, NATO, and the United Nations. The insights we have gained from these glimpses have led to sobering conclusions. Gone is the euphoria felt when the Berlin Wall fell, when dreams soared and when we believed that the UN—“the world community”—would ensure order, that right would prevail over might, and that the Western alliance would survive the end of the cold war. Nothing but illusions—just look at Bosnia, where the great powers and their institutions have failed. The future is not in their hands; instead, the past holds them firmly in its grip.

The UN has once again been exposed as nothing more than what it always has been: a federation of nations that possesses not a single microgram more power than those nations permit it. The Serbs held 400 blue helmets as virtual hostages. And all that Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali could threaten was to completely withdraw his forces—and lose all his power.

What are we to make of an army, now almost 40,000 strong, whose function has become an absurdity? Is it in Bosnia to guarantee peace? It can't do that even in the official protected zones, such as Sarajevo, where shelling has once again become routine, or Bihać. Is it there to create peace by fighting?

That it may not do, although, along with NATO, the UN could at least have prevented a Serbian victory. All that remains for the UN is a function that could not be more shameful: Troops that were sent to protect others protect only themselves, like a police force that runs for cover when the shooting starts.

Meanwhile, NATO has sought over the past five years to

avoid one of the dictates of history: Alliances die when they win as often as when they lose. The fact that an alliance is finished when it must hand over its sword is obvious. But alliances also lose when they triumph, because the threat that called them into action has been removed.

Like a company whose longtime market collapsed, NATO, after the cold war ended, tried to find new products to sell to new clients: to create a peace in Bosnia on one hand, and to expand eastward on the other. Neither product has found customers. And the attempt to sell them has put so much stress on the alliance that no one can say whether it will survive.

With a face as grim as Andrei Gromyko's, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev threw down his gauntlet to the alliance: *nyet* to Eastern Europe in NATO, even though those countries' foreign ministers had timidly agreed to spend a year negotiating the terms for expanding the alliance to the east. And to put teeth in his refusal, Kozyrev also tabled the grandiose NATO-Russia cooperation plan—a program that was supposed to make expansion attractive to Moscow.

Would Kozyrev have done this if the alliance had not been trapped by the war in Bosnia? Moscow has been very much aware that Bosnia has put NATO into its worst fix since Suez in 1956, when the United States forced England and France to back away from their intervention. A war of finger pointing has broken out, in which each power seeks to blame others for the fact that the Bosnians are losing, for the fact that “Greater Serbia” is winning, for the fact that the West has been tried and found wanting.

London and Paris complain that the Americans want to conduct the music but not play in the band. Washington accuses its two oldest allies of cynicism in the tradition of

Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier in 1938—ap-  
peasement of the strong at the cost of the Muslims. Both sides, the Americans as well as the new British-French alliance, are right.

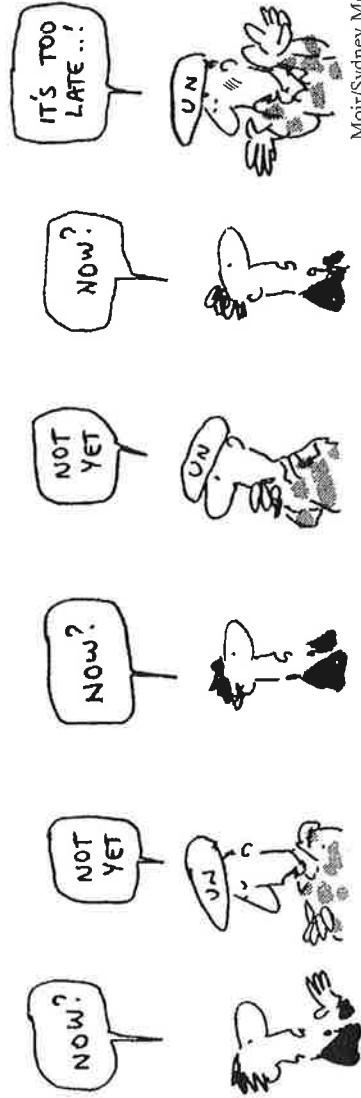
And the Germans? If they had only remained silent, as Defense Minister Volker Rühe ironically noted: If Bonn is not making any military contribution, “we lose the right to make any smart suggestions about the Bosnian matter.”

But this diplomatic competition in stupidity is not the real problem. The heart of the matter is the return of history, which we believed we had overcome. Serbian ambitions, which set off World War I in 1914, have now set Russia marching against the Western powers and divided the Western allies among themselves. The alliance is buckling, and the UN is trying to out-trump this unholy alliance in importance. As London, Paris, Washington, and Bonn cast stones at one another, Russia returns to its familiar role and once again casts its veto against the West's strategic decisions.

In such times, we must keep our eyes on the things that matter. The alliance must realize, in the wake of the Bosnia tragedy, that it will have to limit itself to core issues. NATO cannot create peace beyond its own borders, not even as an auxiliary force to help out the UN, for even a Radovan Karadzic can make a joke of this. It retains only its classical task of serving as a security alliance for the United States and Europe and a bulwark against the old-new Russia.

In the sixth year since the Berlin Wall fell, that will be work enough. The tragedy of Bosnia, the triumph of the strong over the weak, is almost complete. The alliance ought not compound this tragedy by destroying itself. It will be needed—as Kozyrev has now demonstrated.

—Josef Joffe, “Süddeutsche Zeitung” (centrist),  
Munich, Dec. 3, 1994.



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