

Chapter 7

NATO Enlargement: Like Free Solo Climbing

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For my generation, joining the NATO Alliance was a historic opportunity and potentially a dream come true. But at times it seemed like free solo climbing Yosemite's "El Capitan" rockface: there were no ropes. One mistake and we could have plunged to our death. We were performing an acrobatic political act without a safety net. We did indeed break some bones. But then, looking back, that was part of the excitement, the thrill of doing something really great. Those of us who witnessed the process and the raising of the Hungarian flag at NATO Headquarters twenty years ago achieved something that cannot be repeated. We were among the first former members of the Warsaw Pact, the former adversaries, to join NATO.

It was never a given that NATO would open its door to Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. After the fall of communism in Central Europe in 1989 and following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, "revolution" fatigue soon became apparent in many parts of the West. This was a clear case of complacency: the belief that the threats and challenges of the East-West conflict as we knew them were a thing of the past. The ghost haunting the captive nations of Eastern Europe for almost half a century was now thought to be gone. "What's the rush?" Western leaders would ask. "What's the urgency?" "Take it easy," they would suggest, as we in turn pressed forward our desire to join.

No doubt there was a constant element of wanting to appease the Russians, a silly feeling of guilt in some NATO circles for the demise of the Soviet empire, a quasi-apology for upsetting the "cozy" East-West relationship of detente. Apologizing for what? For keeping half of Europe hostage for fifty years? For causing lasting damage to the minds of generations? For suppressing democracy, freedom of thought and freedom of speech? I am forever grateful for the few supporters who initially backed our quest, who believed in us.

Still, the most compelling reason for our drive, the sense of urgency to anchor ourselves in the community of democracies, was more than just the possibility of an external threat to our new-born democracies by a resurgent Russia. Our institutions of democracy were new. The democratic instincts of our elites were weak or idealistic or both. The damage caused by forty years of “socialist experimentation turned bad” was huge, and the forces of restoration were present, strong and lurking in the shadows. No one had imagined the enormity of the tasks ahead of us as we embarked on the process to overhaul the command economy and to establish the rule of law. There was no prior experience in turning around a complete society: simultaneously converting to a market economy *and* moving from dictatorship to democracy. Backsliding was the real worry.

I will not attempt a full exploration of Hungary’s road to NATO membership. I only want to give an account of a few important moments, perhaps my favorite ones in the process. Some of them were “historic and defining,” others simply funny. All of it was part of a process of making history. And history is made of the actions of people.

AWACS? What the H... is That?

It was October 1992. I had only been Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) for NATO at the Hungarian Embassy for a few weeks when the phone rang in my make-shift office on Rue Mignot Delstanche in Brussels. It was an unforgettable call from my colleague at the U.S. NATO Mission, DCM Minister Counsellor Alexander “Sandy” Vershbow. I barely knew my way around town and had only been to NATO Headquarters once. Still I was very aware that this was a U.S.-led institution, and a call from the second-in-command at the U.S. representation was not going to be a conversation about rock and roll music (*As it turned out, it soon was about that as well!*). This was going to be important.

We discussed the increasingly tense situation in Bosnia, the issue of enforcing the U.N. decision of a no-fly zone on Serbian president Milosevic’s forces, and NATO’s possible role in such an operation. Sandy’s question was simple and straight forward: Would Budapest allow NATO AWACS planes to cross into Hungarian airspace to execute their mission? Would Hungary permit these Allied planes to land in

Hungary in case of an emergency? He explained that he had just come out of a meeting of the North Atlantic Council: this was an ask by all 16 nations.

It was unexpected. My immediate problem was that I didn't understand the question at all. What in God's name is he talking about? What's this "avaks"? However, I understood the wider importance immediately, and considered it a real opportunity for Hungary. Already during my very short first few weeks in Brussels, I knew that the process of edging towards NATO would be hard. Only Central Europeans saw NATO membership as a far-away, beyond-the-horizon prospect. We would have to look for "accelerators," as I called our actions. We should seize every opportunity to prove our usefulness to NATO partners, to underscore that we would be net contributors to the Alliance, not just free riders.

Sandy Vershbow's call was one of those opportunities. But there were serious security considerations as well. A war raging just some hundred miles from the Hungarian border in former Yugoslavia posed a threat to our security.

I called a couple of friends in Budapest. By now well-educated and armed with the necessary expertise on "AWACS," I called on Ambassador György Granasztói, who passed Vershbow's request on to Budapest. A day later, I —not the Ambassador — received a call: it was Foreign Minister Jeszenszky.

"Prime Minister Antall wants to talk to you."

"Mister Minister, are you sure he wants to talk to me?" I asked.

"Yes, you. You talked to the Americans, right? So it's you he wants." He handed the phone to Antall.

I had met our Prime Minister a few times in the past, but would never have thought he would want to talk to me, the second secretary. Antall was straight-forward: "Tell me how this will impact our efforts to become members? Would the U.N. resolutions give us cover?" Even if I was uncertain, I gave him very confident, positive answers to both questions.

"Yes, Mr. Prime Minister. I can confirm both!" I knew this was the answer he wanted to hear.

“That’s all I need to know!” he responded. “Tell the Americans that we will need a decision by Parliament, but that I support their request.”

One small step for Hungary, one giant leap for NATO. This was our very first step on the long road to accession, which would be fraught with difficulties and sabotaged by opponents, inside and outside the country. But in the end, Hungary would be included in the first round of enlargement. Those who believed in Hungary’s rise and that the success of our transition lay in our full integration into the West had a great ally in Prime Minister József Antall. He was very clear about his ambition to bring the country into both NATO and the European Communities, as the EU was called at that time. He insisted we push as hard as we could, and move as fast as possible. He did not care in which of the two institutions we first crossed the finish line.

Sandy Vershbow was pleasantly surprised at the quick and positive Hungarian response. This was history in the making in two ways. It would be NATO’s first out-of-area operation, and it would be conducted with the help of a former member of the Warsaw Pact. It required the proper level military cooperation and coordination. It was no doubt a major decision on both sides. It would also be the beginning of a lifelong friendship between me and Sandy Vershbow, who is not just a great diplomat but, as I soon found out, a great drummer as well. Soon we would be comparing notes about our common love for rock and roll and form the first garage band in the history of NATO. We called it the Combined Joint Task Force.

It would be hard to exaggerate the impact the opportunity to support the NATO operation had on us Hungarians, even if it was short of any guarantee that NATO would assist us if Milošević retaliated by attacking Hungary or the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. But Antall weighed the risks and the benefits, and took a bold decision. I thought, “We are now on our way into NATO.”

Unfortunately, many in the NATO orbit saw it differently. This was made very clear to me by NATO’s Political Director at the time, the American John Krindler. At our first meeting, a courtesy call in early October 1992, we had a nice chat about the wonderful revolutions that had swept through Eastern Europe just three years before. Then I explained to him that I was the new diplomat at the Hungarian Embassy

and my job was to get Hungary into NATO. He got agitated and visibly angry he said: “Sir, you are going too far...!”

Dead End Street

Yes, at that time we did go too far. But that was the idea. Over the next few years, at every juncture, we Hungarians went too far. We did this on purpose. We were, in a way, driving the process. We felt a sense of urgency, even a fear, that this window of opportunity to enhance our security and stabilize our weak democracy (which in the ensuing decades has proven to be a lot weaker than I thought) would not last forever. It was also a crash course in understanding the inner workings of the Alliance, including the importance of formal and informal relationships. Nevertheless, as much as we tried, it was still very difficult to navigate the corridors of NATO.

The first steps to involve us under the NATO framework came quickly in the form of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which first met in December 1991, and included all Central and Eastern European countries and the USSR, though ironically the first gathering took place on the very day the USSR was dissolved. This was followed in January 1994 by announcement of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. At the time PfP was a stark disappointment for those of us who were aiming for full membership. Elevated at first through participation in the AWACS mission and in our bilateral discussions, we soon became depressed; there was no sign that NATO was now ready to truly open its doors to new members. Instead, all of us in the post-Soviet sphere, including Russia, were offered “close cooperation.” We felt betrayed. This was clearly not what we had hoped for.

In NATO sometimes small things make a difference. Personal relationships for sure. Immediately after the PfP announcement, one of my most difficult and toughest conversations took place with Robert “Bob” Beecroft, Head of the Political Section of the U.S. mission to NATO (and later U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia 2001-2004). It was at the annual Knokke-Heist meeting of NATO—a kind of retreat, where issues of the day were discussed: obviously the Bosnia humanitarian crisis, which was getting to the top of the agenda, and of course, this new Partner-

ship for Peace. Bob wanted to know my views, “how I felt about this great new program.”

As always, the conversation was agreeable, Bob Beecroft being one of the friendliest and most emphatic persons I have met, an exceptionally smart and shrewd U.S. diplomat. The discussion was between two devoted diplomats who understood what was at stake. I bluntly told him that if this exercise was meant to “appease” the eager Central Europeans, it was the wrong idea. I am sure my message surprised him.

“This is a disappointment.” I said. “Not at all what we had expected. It’s a dead end street and we see this as a way to sidetrack our ambitions to become members.” And, I stressed, “I’d like you to convey home to Washington that some of America’s best friends in Central Europe feel let down.” Bob could have easily ended the conversation.

But he did not discard my criticism. On the contrary. He was generous in his response. He promised to convey my message, a promise he kept. He also told me that we, the ambitious Central Europeans - the Czechs, Poles, Hungarians—can and should turn this around (I wasn’t sure about that!). He also advised me to think of ways Hungary could be useful to the Alliance. Hungary should prove every step along the way that it would be an asset, not a burden.

At the first session of the Partnership for Peace, Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky, with a flat face, endorsed the program.

Bumps on the Road

Unfortunately, by then, the clearly pro-Western Prime Minister Antall had passed away and our support for the AWACS operation was suddenly cast into doubt in Budapest. The new interim Prime Minister, an inexperienced former restaurant manager, Péter Boross, from the conservative MDF party, was clearly against Hungary’s NATO membership and thrust hurdles on the already slow track upon which we were moving. Our support for NATO’s AWACS campaign regarding Bosnia also nearly fell apart. This operation was so important to NATO that Secretary General Manfred Wörner summoned me to his office one day (again in the absence of Ambassador Ganasztói) and sent a very clear message to Budapest about “how this would be viewed by allies.”

We kept the line, but barely. I received unexpected help, support and guidance from Sergio Balanzino, NATO's great Deputy Secretary General. And I would never find out why Gianni Jannuzzi, the Italian Permanent Representative, defied all rules and obligations to keep me informed about the debates and proceedings in the Council. He kept us in line and gave us tremendous encouragement. I became his adopted diplomatic son, and his Chief of Staff Stefano Pontecorvo (today Italy's ambassador in Pakistan) my new Best Friend Forever.

In the spring of 1994, there were elections in Budapest, and the political left, led by Gyula Horn, won a landslide victory. I knew Horn from the past. He was a decent man with an honest Western inclination. He was a communist turned social democrat who had been foreign minister before the Berlin Wall fell. He knew the Russians better than any other on the political stage and for that reason he supported our NATO membership. Even before the changes in 1989, he had alluded to the possibility that Hungary one day should be a member of NATO. So I was now no longer worried about any volte face at Hungary's highest levels on the NATO question. Foreign Minister László Kovács was another stalwart. Both he and Horn had been architects of the historic day when Hungary gave refuge to East Germans, ultimately allowing them to leave via Austria to West Germany in late summer and early fall of 1989, triggering a series of events that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

NATO, however, was worried. Would the rise of the left mean restoration of communism? Would it mean that the steps taken towards a market economy and democracy would now be halted? Would this mean that suddenly Hungarians would echo Russian "worries" about the dangers of NATO enlargement?

Horn and Hungary as a whole had to prove themselves. The first thing the government did, as a sign of its commitment, was to elevate the independent representative to the rank of Ambassador. I remember the Belgian colleagues freaking out: you have no status, you can't be an ambassador. But, as I had understood by now: if the United States accepts me as an ambassador, then I will be the ambassador to NATO. And Robert Hunter, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, liked the idea.

I thus became the very first non-member Ambassador to be "accredited" to NATO. We also pushed hard for a presence at NATO Head-

quarters. I soon moved into the compound. I still have a piece from the ribbon-cutting ceremony, signed by Minister Kovács and Secretary General Javier Solana.

In 1995, an informal defense ministerial was held where a Study on NATO Enlargement was discussed. It stated that nations aspiring to join the Alliance were expected to respect the values of the North Atlantic Treaty, and to meet certain political, economic and military criteria. It was as if the study had been tailor-made for Hungary (criteria mostly abandoned since!). These criteria included: a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy and checks and balances; fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to resolve conflicts peacefully; an ability and willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions. I was ecstatic. This was the signal I had been waiting for. Our moment had arrived. I met my friend Hans Hækkerup, the Danish Defense Minister, in Copenhagen. He told me of the discussions around the first “batch” of possible new members. Then came the cold shower: Hungary is not in the first group, he said, only Poland and the Czechs.

That was devastating news. I immediately discussed this with Foreign Minister Kovács. We agreed on the need to do whatever it took to be in the first round. Horn was totally behind us. Whatever we could come up with. He called me in person to discuss, and pressed hard for a plan. But for the moment there was no plan.

The Opportunity

This is not the place to describe the horrors of the Bosnian genocide, and in no way would I want to suggest that we were cynical about that terrible war and all its victims, and that our position was driven by sheer interest in getting to NATO membership. But we now knew, however, that there was considerable skepticism about Hungary in Washington and in most allied capitals. Nevertheless, I also knew that, given the opportunity, we would be able to prove ourselves. One way or another we would catch up with the Poles and the Czechs. It would just be a matter of time when that opportunity would present itself.

And such an opportunity came after the signing of the Dayton accords on November 21, 1995.

I had become friends with General Jeremy McKenzie, the Deputy SACEUR, a fine British soldier. We had been talking a lot and also discussed the role for NATO in implementing the Dayton accords. He had this idea, very early on, that Hungary could play a significant role once the peace agreement was signed, given its geographical location and the AWACS experience. He made it clear to me that if “we were ever asked to provide support” we should say yes. He said this would give Hungary that long-awaited special opportunity.

Jeremy was right. When U.S. Ambassador Robert Hunter invited me to his office to ask if Hungary would be ready and able to host U.S. troops as part of the Implementation Force (IFOR) for Bosnia-Herzegovina, I did not blink. I asked him if a response the next day would be soon enough. I also told him that I would do my best to secure a positive response from Budapest. I was confident we would do so, since I had already discussed this possibility with Kovács, and he too was enthusiastic (I knew very little about the fight he had on the issue with our arch-conservative defense minister). I knew for sure this was going to be a game changer: U.S. troops stationed on Hungarian soil, American soldiers on the ground in the former Warsaw Pact.

“Tell us how we can help, Mr. Ambassador,” I told Hunter a day later. He smiled and said “I knew Hungary would not disappoint!”

The next thing I knew I was on a plane to Hungary with Jeremy McKenzie. The Hungarian military, conservative by definition, was not ready. At the talks where the Chief of Staff politely explained at length the details of Hungary’s military reforms, McKenzie suddenly asked if there was a map of Hungary “somewhere” at the Ministry. The hosts were curious. Why would the DSACEUR want a map? They brought out the map. Jeremy pointed at the one base which would eventually become the site of the IFOR base: Tászár.

“This is the base I want to visit,” he exclaimed.

The Hungarian generals were furious. They did not want NATO to take over Tászár. They thought it was a set-up, orchestrated by me. Which was of course true. But they did not like civilians like me to interfere. At that time they still did not understand the concept of po-

litical leadership and civilian control. But Jeremy's insistence bore fruit. The next day we flew to Taszár.

Thus started one of the truly great military operations, a breakthrough in the cooperation between NATO and aspiring non-member nations. It was a huge political, military and logistical challenge. It would be a success. We made history. The whole episode changed the chemistry between Hungary and NATO. Taszár turned out to be much more than just another element in our quest for membership. It was also a statement about the relationship between Americans and Hungarians. It was something of which we could be proud. NATO fulfilled its historic mission to stabilize Bosnia, and my country performed well with NATO. The people of Taszár proved to be fantastic hosts to U.S. troops.

Years later, as ambassador to the United States, I was on my way from Cleveland to speak at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. My driver exceeded the speed limit and a morose trooper flagged him down. The trooper was angry. The driver explained that his passenger was the Hungarian ambassador. The officer walked over to my side of the car, asked me to pull down the window, saluted and said the following, smiling: "Sir, a few years ago I served in the Army and I was posted to the town of Taszár. I want to thank you and your countrymen for your kind hospitality. Would you please ask your driver to drive safely!?" And he escorted us all the way to the Pennsylvania border. What are the odds?!

We made it to the first round of those to walk through NATO's door. At the 1997 Madrid summit, the Poles, the Czechs and the Hungarians were invited to start accession talks. By that time, we had another great ally in the U.S. administration: Madeleine Albright, who of all the allied foreign ministers best understood our difficulties and the importance—for us—of NATO enlargement. Sandy Vershbow was now Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council. It was an uplifting moment when President Clinton in a private conversation thanked Hungary for its support to the U.S. troops in Bosnia.

Rather than detailing the agenda items, and the nitty-gritty, of the two-year accession process, I want to recall a few more memorable moments. When we were asked to provide details of our armed forces and military spending and about the contributions we would make to the alliance, I was approached by the ambassador of one of the smaller

founding members. He told me that we needn't worry too much about the numbers: he would show us how to "make them look bigger than they actually are." What he really meant was that they did not carry their fair share of the burden, but that they knew how to cook the books. I would remember this conversation in the future whenever the debate about burden-sharing heated up again and again over the next twenty years.

I also recall conversations about the importance of democratic credentials of member states. It was assumed that the new members would be firmly-rooted liberal democracies, with a guarantee for the rule of law, a clear separation of powers and a multiparty system. I was less optimistic. At a certain point I recall some talk about the introduction of safeguards in case there would ever be any backsliding in the democratic credentials in new member states. Even the idea of an "expulsion clause" was discussed, to have a mechanism in place should a new member backslide on its commitments. Only a few of us took the position that perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea. Unfortunately, the expulsion clause was deemed unnecessary. I was no prophet, but we knew our history.

Strawberry Fields Forever

In 1998 there were elections in Hungary. The leader of the Young Liberals, Viktor Orbán, won and became prime minister. We would soon celebrate our membership in NATO. We would also prepare for war. The situation south of the border was getting increasingly tense, and Europe once again was looking on helplessly as Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was creating yet again a humanitarian crisis, this time in Kosovo. So even as we were rejoicing over the historic moment of membership, we had to prepare for the possibility of a hot war, now as members of NATO.

On March 19 1999, I stood by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as the red, white and green Hungarian flag was raised at NATO Headquarters. I have no reason to doubt his honesty when he spoke about the Alliance being the key to Hungary's future. His eventual political volte-face, his turning away from the principles and values enshrined in the Treaty, his appeasing approach towards Russia, was nowhere to be seen,

even in traces. For Horn and Kovács, who had done so much to get there, 1999 was a bittersweet moment: they were not invited to the ceremony. I felt bad about that. I believe in broad bipartisan cooperation across party lines on basic issues pertaining to the security and progress of our country. The achievement of membership simply fell into Orbán's lap. He had done very little to get us there.

On March 24, 1999, the bombardment of Yugoslavia began. I remember a short conversation on the secure NATO line with Orbán. I told him something that perhaps was a bit brash: "We will start bombing tomorrow. I hope your hand will not shake when you press the button" (meaning ordering the high alert of the Hungarian Armed Forces).

He responded firmly: "It won't." Our baptism by fire began.

No one could have imagined that we would join an Alliance, created to avoid war, and that then essentially on day one we'd find ourselves as NATO members actually going to war. But that's what it was. War. In a neighboring country. No other member state had to endure the risks that Hungary had in those days. To his credit Orbán stood firm, even in the face of Russian threats. The population, too, was remarkably solid in its support of the government. Even as novices, we did not take decisions lightly, at times fighting hard to push back unreasonable U.S. military demands. But we understood our obligation as new members to make sure we would not get in the way of a successful operation. We were not immune to the dangers to our citizens and in particular the Hungarian minority in Serbia. They could have become targets not of a NATO attack but of Serbian retaliation. We had to step into the role of a responsible member overnight. But we were ready—also to take a strong stance against Russian efforts to undermine NATO.

My favorite anecdote from those days is one I kept to myself for twenty years. As the operation was underway, I received a call from Foreign Minister János Martonyi.

"We've got a problem" he said.

"What is that János?" I inquired.

"It's strawberry season. The Hungarians in Vojvodina are out picking strawberries. They cannot be hit. Tell NATO that we'll send them the coordinates where the strawberry fields are."

I called DSACEUR General Dieter Stöckmann and presented the request.

“No big deal, Hungary has done enough. Send me the coordinates, András. Tell the Minister that his Hungarians will be fine. Send me some nice strawberries.”

Strawberry Fields Forever.

Warning Signs on the Road Ahead

When in 2000 Vladimir Putin emerged as the “compromise” successor to Boris Yeltsin, we Hungarians, the Poles, and the Czechs were among the few who saw this as a writing on the wall that the cozy, even if somewhat chaotic, decade of transition in Eastern Europe was now over. I recall a conversation with NATO Secretary General George Robertson about my worries. I told him that Putin’s arrival meant “the old guard” was back. He told me that like all Hungarians I worried too much, and that I should not judge Putin on the basis of our experience with Russia in the past. I have enormous respect for George Robertson, he was a great Secretary General, but I did not agree with him.

I proved to be right. Yeltsin’s successors, heirs to the Russian tradition of disruption, embodied an almost genetically-coded aversion to the West, and an anger (wrapped in a sense of humiliation) for losing the Cold War. Those feelings were all there. They were far from gone. We had felt the Russians breathing down our neck throughout the accession process. And we had also seen that some allies would go weak in their knees at the opposition expressed by the Kremlin to our membership. It was only a matter of time when Russia would flex its muscles again. Twenty years ago, Vladimir Putin might have seemed to some like a “nobody,” a weak outsider. But having a deep understanding of Russia, we were uncomfortable already then.

When I left NATO in 2001, the Alliance was in great shape. I had no doubt that our accession was the best thing that ever happened to us, maybe in a thousand years. Regrettably, the developments some ten years later were less encouraging. But that story is for someone else to tell.

