

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Partnership for Peace Within Reach”

At the end of this month, on 28 and 29 November, NATO leaders meet in Riga, Latvia, to set the Alliance's agenda for the next couple of years. The focal points of the Summit will likely be military transformation and NATO's growing commitment to peace-building in Afghanistan. However, the former Yugoslavia will also feature in discussions and there is a possibility that Bosnia and Herzegovina will be invited to join NATO's Partnership-for-Peace programme.

I very much hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina will receive such an invitation. It would be well deserved. A huge amount has been achieved in the field of defence reform in recent years, with the net result that the country now has a defence system that it can afford and that meets its needs. PfP membership is the next logical step.

There is, however, one issue that could still keep Bosnia and Herzegovina out of the Partnership for Peace. The authorities are still not cooperating in a satisfactory way with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

Participation in the Partnership for Peace is in many ways the Euro-Atlantic equivalent of signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union. It is in effect the first step on the road to NATO membership. And the prospect of eventual membership of the European Union and NATO is the key to a safe and secure future for Bosnia and Herzegovina and all its citizens.

The Partnership for Peace was created in 1994 by my former colleague in the German government, Manfred Woerner, when he was NATO Secretary General. It was, and remains, a highly innovative programme designed to facilitate cooperation with partner countries to extend the zone of peace and stability in Europe. It consists of practical, bilateral activities between individual partner countries and NATO that allow partner countries to develop their own relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation.

Every PfP member must make a number of political commitments to preserve democratic societies; to maintain the principles of international law; to fulfil obligations under the UN charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki Final Act and international disarmament and arms-control agreements; to refrain from the threat or use of force against other states; to respect existing borders; and to settle disputes peacefully.

PfP members also make specific commitments to promote transparency in national defence planning and budgeting in order to establish democratic control over armed forces, and to develop the capacity for joint action with NATO in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

In return, NATO provides a comprehensive cooperation programme and the Allies commit to consulting with any Partner country that perceives a direct threat to its territorial integrity, its political independence or its security. In addition, partner countries are entitled to have their own representations at NATO Headquarters and to participate in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, a broader forum for dialogue and consultation on political and security-related issues that is also at NATO Headquarters.

For those countries that aspire to be NATO members, the Partnership for Peace is also a first step towards participating in the Membership Action Plan, which is a tailored programme preparing partner countries for membership. Latvia, the host of the forthcoming Summit, and the six other former Communist countries that joined NATO in 2004, all went through this process. And Albania, Croatia and Macedonia are all currently participating in the Membership Action Plan.

NATO has already overseen a remarkable transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's defence structures. This has involved the introduction of a state-level, civilian-led command-and-control structure including a state-level Defence Ministry; democratic parliamentary control and oversight of the armed forces; transparency in defence plans and budgets; development of a national security policy; common doctrine, training and equipment standards; and major reductions in the armed forces. In 2005, Bosnia and Herzegovina went well beyond the minimum conditions NATO established for PfP membership by agreeing a single NATO-compatible military force, whose development is now well under way.

The manner in which these reforms have been implemented, through the political and professional commitment of stakeholders right across the country's defence establishment led by Defence Minister Nikola Radovanovic, will serve as an excellent preparation for PfP membership.

But cooperation with The Hague Tribunal is not yet satisfactory, and this will prevent further progress. Specifically, the authorities of Republika Srpska must do what they are morally and legally obliged to do. Among other things, they must demonstrate in a practical and measurable way that they are doing everything possible to assist in the arrest of war-crimes suspects who are still at liberty. When they do that, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be invited to join the Partnership for Peace. If they don't, it won't.

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