

In the end, they solved the problem of Alexander Lukashenko's determination to attend the Prague summit of NATO, by simply refusing him a visa.

Lukashenko, the president and in practice the dictator of Belarus, reacted in typical fashion by threatening the richer countries to the west: "Europeans...will crawl and ask for our cooperation on drugs trafficking and illegal immigration. If the Europeans don't pay, we will not protect Europe from these flows."

He would have preserved his dignity better if he had recalled Groucho Marx's famous dictum: "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." The same applies to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, who was also refused a visa for Prague by Czech presi-

What is NATO for?

dent Vaclav Havel after the US government alleged that he recently sold an advanced radar system to Iraq. But here's the odd thing: they'd both join NATO if they could.

Seven former Communist nations — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria — are lined up to join the alliance at this summit, which will bring its membership up to 26 countries. Russia already has a permanent security partnership with NATO, though President Vladimir Putin is conscious enough of Russia's dignity to stay away from a session that is admitting three former republics of the Soviet Union as members. Even China has recently expressed an interest in creating some kind of

Russian-style strategic relationship with NATO.

Not bad going for an alliance that was supposed to lose its relevance after the reason it was originally created for — to oppose Soviet expansionism in the Cold War — lost all meaning with the collapse of Communist rule in Europe post-1989. So what is it actually for nowadays?

It's easy to understand why the ex-Communist countries want to join: membership means they are part of 'the West' and no longer in the Russian sphere of influence. This is psychologically important for Eastern European countries that spent decades under Soviet domination even though Russia is no longer a threat to them (and would probably join NATO itself

if it could). But it hardly defines NATO: the seven countries that are joining this year have no more people than Spain, and a joint economic weight no greater than Belgium's.

The bluntest description of NATO's real purpose, uttered in 1949 by Lord Ismay, the alliance's first secretary-general, was that it existed "for three reasons: to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." That made sense at a time when Europeans were afraid that the Soviet Union might attack, were equally afraid that the Americans might go home and abandon them to their fate, and still lived in fear of a reunited Germany.

But most of this is now ancient history. Germany has been

reunited for ten years, but poses no threat whatever to its neighbours. The Soviet Union is long gone, and though Russia's sheer size still makes it hard to imagine integrating it into NATO or the European Union, it is certainly not a threat or an enemy. So what is NATO for in 2002?

The official answer is that NATO is now America's staunchest ally in the 'war against terror', and the West's principal vehicle for military interventions beyond the North Atlantic area. It is, however, a somewhat decrepit vehicle for this purpose, as NATO Secretary-General George Robertson told a seminar in Brussels two weeks ago. "There are two million troops in uniform in Europe, half a million more

than the Americans, but only a fraction are deployable," he complained. Lord Robertson went on to point out that the US has 250 large transport planes to move troops around the planet, while the European members of NATO have just eleven. Other invidious comparisons of the same sort followed.

But there was an unasked question behind all this rhetoric: just why would the European members of NATO want to fly large numbers of their troops to the far corners of the Earth? The 'war on terror' would be the most common answer in Washington these days, but that doesn't really make sense: terrorists are civilians living among other civilians, and conventional military forces are only rarely the appropriate instrument to use against them. Police forces and intelligence services are generally a great deal more useful.—Copyright

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