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How NATO Joined Hungary

DONALD BLINKEN

The last Russian troops left Hungary in 1991. Only four years later, American forces under NATO command were invited to establish a base in Hungary to support IFOR's peacekeeping role in Bosnia. Why did NATO zero in on the Taszar airfield Hungary, how did the US prepare the Hungarians for this historical gesture, what were the practical issues faced by the Hungarian and American negotiators, are questions answered by a key participant, former US Ambassador Donald Blinken (1994–97). The difficult US–Hungarian negotiations, their happy resolution, as well as some corollary events occasioned by President Clinton's January 1996 visit to Taszar, form an insider's description of 'How NATO Joined Hungary' ... helpful guidelines for future American diplomatic and military policy-makers.

The groundbreaking collaboration of NATO with Hungary – a non-NATO member – in successfully intervening in Bosnia, has not received adequate attention. As US Ambassador to Hungary for almost four years, I played a role in NATO's post-Cold War evolution from a defensive alliance to the provider of security and stability throughout Europe. How this [co-operation] was accomplished without any precedent to rely upon, may offer some useful guidelines for future American policy-makers and be of special interest to scholars of international relations and historians of the period.

The last Russian troops quietly quit Hungary in 1991, leaving behind ghostly airfields, military bases and communications centres stripped of their wiring and plumbing fixtures. The Hungarian people breathed a sigh of relief. For the first time in almost 50 years, no uninvited foreign forces occupied Hungarian soil. Yet, just four years later, American troops under NATO command, were invited freely, in fact enthusiastically, by the Hungarian government to establish a NATO base at a former Hungarian airfield at Taszar in support of NATO's Implementation Force (IFOR) peacekeeping operations in Bosnia.

The Hungarian government and subsequently the Hungarian people welcomed the US/NATO troops with some trepidation but also with a feeling

of *carpe diem* – a unique opportunity to bring some peace and stability to the former Yugoslavia and at the same time advance their case for NATO membership and deeper integration with the West. This Hungarian realism was, in the end, more than proven right. But the success of NATO's projection through Hungary was far from pre-ordained; so intimate a collaboration with a former Warsaw Pact country had never been attempted.

United States-Hungarian relations, put to their most demanding test since the end of the Cold War, could have taken a turn for the worse, erasing six years of growing progress and co-operation. The strengths or weaknesses of American advice and assistance to Hungary's Warsaw Pact trained and equipped defence establishment would now be exposed to the light of a real test. NATO and the US Army in Europe (USAEUR in Germany) would wrestle with the challenge of projecting NATO power through a non-NATO country – one also lacking a contiguous border with any NATO member.

On the diplomatic front, the Departments of State, Defense and the NSC, through their surrogates in Budapest and Germany, would be obliged to co-operate and innovate in uncharted waters, balancing their Dayton Accord mandates with the delicate task of working with and through a former Warsaw Pact member.

From Hungary's perspective, its NATO aspirations would come up against the reality of an 'invasion' by friendly NATO troops only four years after it was rid of the Russians. How would the Hungarian public react?

Finally, could the United States and Hungary perfect a complicated and groundbreaking series of legal steps and agreements under severe time pressure in order to accomplish the Dayton mission, pay due respect to democratic processes, and satisfy their own self interests? In November 1995, none of the desired outcomes was either self-evident or inevitable.

THE VIEW FROM HUNGARY IN 1995

The Government of Hungary, by virtue of its geographic proximity to the former Yugoslavia, had been obliged to tread circumspectly during the Bosnian fighting. Only a few years before, fighting in Croatia had brought the danger of the Yugoslav crisis to the very border of Hungary. By the autumn of 1995, that government recognized that US leadership in restoring calm in Bosnia spelled a fundamental change in the likely outcome. The shift in US policy from frustrated observance of the carnage in Bosnia to proactive intervention was greeted with expressions of relief by the Hungarian government.

By 1995 Hungary had two foreign policy priorities. Along with its determination to improve relations with its immediate neighbours, Romania

and Slovakia, it was determined at all costs to receive an invitation to join NATO. Hanging over these priorities like a storm cloud was Bosnia, both a security threat and an economic burden for Hungary. Early in the Yugoslav disintegration and débâcle, fighting had briefly spilled over into Hungarian territory and airspace. While Hungarian borders and airspace had been honoured during the previous three years, the threat of new fighting to the south whether in Bosnia or Croatia, remained. Economically, Hungary estimated that its observance of the economic sanctions levelled at Serbia had, by 1995, cost it more than \$1 billion in lost trade and shipping revenues. And of course, all Hungarians were conscious of the risks posed to the Hungarian minorities resident in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. So Hungary's public policy was always to tread lightly, avoiding provocation of its southern neighbours. As the highly esteemed Hungarian President Arpad Goncz had noted on numerous occasions, 'We are obliged by history to live in a very dangerous neighborhood.'

However, both Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn, who had grown up in the former Warsaw Pact school of diplomatic hardball, and his highly accomplished Foreign Minister, Laszlo Kovacs, had told both Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Secretary of Defense William Perry in my presence, that the only thing that certain neighbors to the south really understood was the threat of force made credible by American leadership. Nothing else would impress Belgrade or Zagreb.

The critical importance of US leadership was very much on my mind. The UN failure to retaliate against Bosnian Serb shelling of Sarajevo and Srebrenica was politically and morally unacceptable. I was painfully aware that US prestige was visibly ebbing away, not only in Hungary and the new democracies of Central Europe, but also in Western European capitals. This boded poorly for all future US interests in Europe and in the former Soviet Union. While the United States seemed unable to make up its mind, both Assistant Secretary Richard Holbrooke and UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright's activism seemed both right and overdue. Like Americans and Western Europeans, the Hungarians and their neighbours also watched CNN. Sarajevo too often reminded them of Budapest in late 1944 or 1956. So the evident relief in Hungarian government circles when NATO finally bombed Serbian positions in August 1995, was almost palpable.

NATO COMES INTO PLAY

Together with our Hungarian colleagues, we closely followed reports out of Dayton. We had been put on full alert by the NATO Defense Ministers' October meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia, which Holbrooke describes in his definitive book *To End a War*: 'With surprisingly little difficulty, the

ministers gave (Sec) Perry support for a structure without precedent – one that would enforce a peace agreement and include both NATO and non-NATO troops.'

Whether the Dayton conference, which began on 1 November, produced a peace accord or not, it was clear that US forces would now be positioned alongside British, French and other UN troops, either to enforce a peace agreement or, in the worst case, to help extricate UN forces from Bosnia.

The Hungarians had also anticipated possible involvement in a NATO-led Bosnian operation. In fact, on 11 October 1995, the Hungarian Ambassador to NATO, Andras Simonyi, told my Embassy's NATO Expansion Task Force that on the previous day he had delivered to Brussels, Hungary's offer of support for IFOR. In what he termed 'an offer in principle', Hungary stood ready to give NATO use of its airfields, military installations and other resources to support IFOR operations. Hungary's parliament would need to approve any specific arrangement that had been worked out with NATO planners.

UNCHARTED WATERS: PROJECTING NATO THROUGH A NON-MEMBER COUNTRY

So my team and I were not surprised to learn that CINCUSAREUR General William Crouch, accompanied by Lt General John Abrams (the son of the famed hero of the relief of Bastogne in World War II and subsequently Chief of Staff of the US Army, General Creighton W. Abrams Jr) and several colleagues would like to come and see me on 2 November, to discuss with me and my Country Team the possible need to use Hungarian facilities for the logistical support of US/NATO forces taking part in IFOR.

2 November 1995

Bill Crouch (subsequently Vice Chief of Staff, US Army) and his team turned up at 8am on 2 November and as is customary met briefly with me in my office, which has a unique history. From 1956 to 1971 it was the home and refuge of Cardinal Josef Mindszenty, who was given sanctuary from his communist persecutors by a succession of US envoys. The Cardinal, who enjoyed a reputation for personal courage, would have undoubtedly relished the sight of so many distinguished US military leaders, chests resplendent with decorations, meeting in the room that for 15 years had served as his haven.

After a 'country team' briefing to give Crouch a current update on Hungarian developments and attitudes, I turned the meeting over to him. Using detailed flip charts, he reviewed the IFOR assignment likely to be handed to US forces in Europe; the availability and current positioning of American troops (principally Germany), the number of personnel

committed to IFOR; and their likely destination in Bosnia. To accomplish this would require the largest deployment of US forces in Europe since World War II. Key to this undertaking would be the establishment of a staging area close by but not in Bosnia or Croatia, with secure facilities, a safe and friendly environment, dependable road, rail and air infrastructure, and, not least, genuine co-operation from the host government. The only country that met these criteria was Hungary.

After some 30 minutes of presentation, during which my colleagues later told me that General Crouch's team wore increasingly worried expressions on their faces, he put down his briefing book; Hungary was their first choice for an IFOR staging base. If President Clinton gave IFOR the green light, he asked, would I advise and support him in asking our Hungarian hosts for the use of Hungarian facilities. He assumed that this might be a long and complicated process for which he was seeking my advice. He added that there was no need to consider his request immediately; could I give it some thought and then get back to him.

Bill Crouch, who is a very impressive soldier and diplomat, had posed his conclusions and request in precisely the most effective and correct manner. By suggesting that I 'think on the matter', he politely deferred to my status as the senior US official in Hungary. And he also gave me the opportunity, if I wished to seize it, to establish the Embassy's viewpoint in a positive way at the very outset. 'General', I replied, 'I don't need time to reflect on your request. When you are ready to call upon us to ask officially for Hungarian co-operation, consider it done.' The relief on the faces of Crouch's team was, I was told later, clearly visible. Crouch had been very sensitive to the manner in which to enlist an ambassador's co-operation; I was impressed by his approach. He left Budapest knowing that he could count on the Embassy's unconditional support.

DEMOCRACY AGAINST EFFICIENCY; COULD HUNGARY MEET THE TEST?

3 November

The day following Crouch's visit to the Embassy, my political Counselor William Siefken and the Embassy's acting Defense Attaché Colonel Jon Martinson called upon the Hungarian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence to alert them to a possible US request for use of facilities for logistical support.

10 November

Seven days later, on 10 November, USCOM Director of Operations, Rear Admiral Charles Abbot, led a delegation to Budapest to begin initial talks

with the Hungarian government on the 'possible establishment of an IFOR logistical operation in Hungary'. A key member of the US military team was Brigadier General, now Major General, James Wright, who was to organize the entire logistical operation with great skill and charm. The US team immediately launched into a briefing on the state of its military planning followed by Wright's description of the possible extent of activity in Hungary – including the use of air, rail, road and river transport, and deployment of up to 3,000 military permanent party personnel to be stationed in Hungary to support these operations.

Reiterating their strong support, in principle, the Hungarians made it clear that they viewed these plans as not only contributing to peace in Bosnia but also to Hungary's continuing efforts to become NATO interoperable, and ultimately, to become a member of NATO.

Reassured on this point by Admiral Abbot, they welcomed the suggestion that three days later – on 13 November – a team of 40 logistical planners from USAREUR arrive for a 3–4 day fact finding mission. Their recommendations would then require inter-agency approval from Washington and the required agreement from the Hungarian government.

13 November

The planners arrived wearing civilian clothes to minimize local speculation. Headed by Jim Wright, who had originally recommended Hungary as the best potential staging area, the planning team first had their attention directed to locations in southern Hungary including Baja. Yet Wright and his colleagues had been advised that the ancient city of Pecs offered the best prospects. But it soon became clear that Pecs lacked the infrastructure, particularly railheads and the heavy duty airfield, necessary to handle the approximately 26,000 troops expected to transit through Hungary.

At this point, someone raised the possibility of Taszar, which in fact proved to be the best possible choice. On the same day, Hungary's Minister of Defence, Gyorgy Keleti, briefed his National Security Cabinet on the status of the USAREUR fact-finding mission. And the following day, the six Hungarian parliamentary parties were brought into the picture.

16 November

As a final preparatory step, Keleti briefed the full Hungarian Cabinet. The Cabinet, in turn, drafted and approved a parliamentary resolution to be introduced if and when IFOR and the US formally requested the use of Hungarian facilities.

FROM A COMMAND SYSTEM TO PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

It did not escape my notice that the Government of Hungary, only a few short years after Russian troops finally exited its territory, was meticulous in observing all the required legal steps before formally committing itself to its new allies. Hungary's Prime Minister Horn had grown up and mastered his political and diplomatic skills under the old command system. In domestic matters he sometimes appeared to fall back upon his earlier experiences. But in foreign policy and security matters, he was always careful to respect Parliament's role as provided by Hungary's new constitution. A vivid demonstration of the key role played by the Hungarian Parliament, and in particular its Defense Committee, occurred the following year when a senior Hungarian officer gave permission for a few Hungarian MiGs to take part in a PFP air exercise over Poland – but without first making the necessary request to the Parliamentary Defence Committee. Although all agreed that he was a fine officer and had, without doubt, innocently overlooked his consultative responsibility, he nevertheless resigned from office shortly thereafter – having broken a constitutional imperative.

A busy and decisive day was 16 November. Senior US military officials met with their Hungarian counterparts to discuss the initial results of their fact-finding mission. Their surveys had now concluded that the airbase and surrounding area in the Taszar/Kaposvar region, in south-central Hungary could serve most effectively as the reception, staging and onward movement facility. Taszar, a functioning Hungarian military airfield, offered several and clear advantages: it featured a long airstrip which had been built to handle fairly heavy aircraft. In addition, a spur railhead from a mainline led directly to a siding alongside the field. This was to prove invaluable in facilitating the transfer of personnel, materials and weapons among and between the cargo planes, freight trains, trucks and bases, which would pour into Taszar en route to Bosnia in a few weeks time. And Taszar was only a few miles from the mid-sized city of Kaposvar, which also offered excellent rail and road connections with the West and Budapest. Jim Wright accurately predicted that tying these two facilities together, would meet most IFOR requirements.

With the survey results in hand and the likelihood of a Presidential directive activating IFOR mounting, the Embassy in co-operation with the US military, now put its political/legal plans into high gear. For the Hungarians this primarily meant readying parliamentary resolutions and approvals. For the Embassy, it was time to review the legal framework needed to launch this operation. The US and Hungary had already signed a Status of Forces Agreement (a SOFA), the terms governing the treatment

and conduct of friendly foreign forces in a host country. Yet there still remained the necessity of concluding transit as well as acquisition and supply agreements.

21 November

On this same day, President Clinton, speaking from the White House Rose Garden said, 'Now that a detailed settlement has been reached (in Dayton) NATO will rapidly complete its planning for IFOR. American leadership, together with our allies is needed to make the peace real and enduring.'

All of us, Hungarians and Americans, now acted upon the assumption that our planning and fact finding were soon to be translated into action.

23 November

Two days later, a second team of some 50 USAREUR planners led by Wright, plunged into detailed surveys. Wright is a highly professional logistics officer (he now is Commandant, US Army Quartermaster Center and School.) His extraordinary charm and 'can do' attitude worked wonders with the Hungarians, whose memories of Soviet style military decision-making were quickly, and one hopes, permanently erased by Wright's way of doing business.

Even 'Friendly' Invasions Are By No Means Simple

Yet smooth sailing was to come later. The issue which now began to cloud our bilateral talks was the hammering out of an acquisition agreement between the US/IFOR Forces and the Government of Hungary; a broad and detailed range of issues included direct IFOR contracting; establishing a protocol for the primary subcontractor, Brown & Root; writing a rental agreement for the use of Hungarian facilities; consular, customs and police co-operation; taxation and US military financial arrangements; a claims procedure for the inevitable damages; air space management and blanket air clearances; radio frequency usage; convoy documentation; and press/public relations co-ordination – just some of the details that had to be concluded if the IFOR transit, no matter how well planned and executed militarily – was to succeed.

The only way to keep on top of these issues was to set up a series of overlapping task forces, both within the Embassy and externally with the Hungarian government. The Hungarians, meanwhile, were wary and uncertain as to how far they should push financial arrangements in advance of an IFOR operation, the scope of which they could only imagine. The first draft of an acquisition agreement (US purchases during the first full year of IFOR staging came to more than \$100 million; not a large number by US standards but extremely significant in Hungary, where the average monthly

wage was \$350 to \$400), was prepared by the Embassy together with its US Military colleagues.

CRITICAL JUNCTION

25 November

I called upon the very Western, young acting Foreign Minister, Istvan Szent-Ivany, who confirmed Hungarian willingness to proceed informally with preparations for IFOR deployment. Demonstrating flexibility, he suggested that pending a formal UN Security Council resolution, his government would be willing to accept a US request as a basis for going to Parliament.

As a consequence, we cabled Washington with the proposed text of a diplomatic notice 'requesting the Government of Hungary's permission to introduce US military and civilian personnel and their associated equipment and supplies into Hungary in order to begin preparations for possible deployment of IFOR forces'. We also reported that Szent-Ivany indicated a Hungarian willingness to waive standard parliamentary procedures in order to introduce on an exceptional basis the necessary parliamentary resolution. Since Parliament met in Plenary Session only on Mondays and Tuesdays, such a US request would need to be received no later than the opening of business on Monday, 27 November if Parliament was to act that week. My cable concluded with the observation that 'the Government of Hungary wants very much to make a contribution and is willing to provide support in whatever way it can'.

While I was meeting with Szent-Ivany, Lt General John Abrams, accompanied by Jim Wright and my political/military team, revisited Taszar and Kaposvar for a final look at what needed to be done.

FROM DAYTON TO TASZAR

President Clinton's announcement also had the effect of putting the steps needed to gain formal Hungarian consent on a fast track. Secretary Holbrooke had returned to Washington from Dayton and soon had his team at State focusing on IFOR implementation. Having triumphed by sheer will and force of personality over innumerable obstacles, he was quite naturally concerned that Murphy's law not come into play once IFOR was unleashed. I was advised that Holbrooke had summoned his entire staff and expressed concern that the Budapest Embassy as well as others in the region might not realize how complicated was the task they now faced; that we might be unaware of the complex steps that would have to be taken in a few days time to get the political, military and public diplomacy aspects of the arrival of NATO in Hungary right.

I sympathized with Holbrooke's concerns: I admired not only the thrust of his policies but also, and most important, the fact that he cared so deeply. But, I was certain that both my Embassy and our military colleagues and advisors were well ahead of the curve. I so advised Secretary Holbrooke. I was gratified that he had confidence in me and my staff, because I did not hear more about the IFOR build-up in Taszar until we met there on 13 January 1996.

HUNGARY SHEDS THE PAST AND FACES THE FUTURE

We received approval from State the day before Thanksgiving to proceed with delivering an informal text of our request for the use of Hungarian facilities to the Government of Hungary on Friday, in order to give it the weekend to review the text and prepare its own resolution to be delivered to Parliament the following Monday. The Hungarian Foreign Ministry received the actual diplomatic note the following Monday morning, 27 November.

28 November

That afternoon, I was proud to send the following cable to Washington – one that gave me perhaps the greatest personal satisfaction of my service as Ambassador:

Following consultations with the leaders of the six Parliamentary parties on the morning of November 27th, the Parliamentary Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee met in an exceptional combined session at noon November 27. The two committees approved the text of a Parliamentary resolution authorizing Hungary to provide support to IFOR. This resolution was then passed by the entire Parliament on the evening of November 28th by a vote of 312 in favor and 1 against it, with six abstentions. The resolution provides for the transit and temporary stationing of IFOR forces (not limited to US forces) along with their equipment and supplies as well as the use of Hungarian air space.

In addition, we cabled, 'Parliament ratified the NATO Status of Forces agreement, putting (it) officially in force'. And in another bit of good if unexpected news, we reported that 'the Government also sought Parliamentary authorization to send a military bridging unit to participate in the IFOR operation in Bosnia'.

This was obviously an advance from Prime Minister Horn's earlier statement that Hungary could not send troops to join in a military operation in a neighbouring country. While engineers were obviously important, they

were also non-combat troops. In a clever compromise, Hungary would be seen to be contributing to IFOR above and beyond the leasing of bases – yet none of its neighbours could be offended. In due course, Hungary would contribute some 400 engineers who played a valuable role in restoring destroyed bridges on the approach march through Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The remarkable Hungarian response to our request for IFOR assistance not only set an example for all the other European countries likely to be involved in IFOR transit activity, but also earned Hungary high marks in Washington and the other NATO capitals. By putting aside both domestic politics and residual fears following 45 years of Soviet occupation in just 48 hours time, Hungary demonstrated in a manner that no words could match, that it was clearly prepared to be taken seriously as a candidate for NATO membership. I wrote letters to President Goncz, Prime Minister Horn, Foreign Minister Kovacs and Defense Minister Keleti expressing the US Government's appreciation for their resolution of support.

ENLISTING THE SUPPORT OF THE HUNGARIAN PEOPLE

4 December

The Hungarian and international press were restlessly awaiting the arrival of the first IFOR troops in Taszar, but poor weather and German railroad scheduling delays combined to cause some slippage. Virtually all personnel and materials would be coming from USAREUR bases in western Germany – a 96-hour trip by road. We decided, however, that the press should not be kept waiting, whether IFOR troops had arrived or not. So on 4 December, a gray overcast day, some 100 Hungarian and international journalists, accompanied by my wife Vera and our US Information Services staff, were given a preview of Taszar. They found a rather depressing Hungarian air force base, with only a few serviceable buildings providing shelter from the elements. This preview turned out to be a very valuable exercise, because the contrast between the Taszar of 4 December and what the media and Hungarian officers would find just three weeks later, was a revelation. This highlighted the unparalleled ability of the US military to overcome any obstacles – whether natural or man-made – in providing servicemen and women with safe, efficient and reasonably comfortable facilities anywhere in the world in record time.

7 December

'Orders were issued for the logistical support operation', we cabled,

this should pave the way for the arrival of two C-130 aircraft on December 9th (they actually arrived on December 10th) which would

carry approximately 130 personnel who would get the bases ready to receive troops. The Ambassador plans to be in Taszar to welcome them upon their arrival. General Abrams is tentatively scheduled to take command at Taszar on December 10th.

8 December

We advised Washington that 'Embassy contacting senior officers in Kaposvar and USAREUR to discuss need for a military public affairs officer on site as well as for more publicly releasable information and greater access for the media'.

Military bases in Hungary, whether operated by government or Soviet troops had always been 'off limits'. The Hungarian people viewed them with a mixture of apprehension and disdain. We were determined at the outset that the IFOR bases be seen in a positive and friendly way by the Hungarian people and media. In due course we would open the bases to the public on a regular and controlled basis – consistent with security. We reached out to all local elected officials, who were invited on base whenever important personages were expected. And the US Army's civil-military operation center in Kaposvar, set in motion an all out PR effort reaching into local schools, churches and businesses.

This was to pay off – both for IFOR and Hungary. Press reports from Taszar were consistently positive, and the normal friction caused by the movement of more than 25,000 troops and heavy equipment in and around Taszar/Kaposvar, was mitigated by the hospitality offered the local populace. The proof of the pudding came on 16 November 1997, the day the Hungarian people held a referendum on whether to seek NATO membership. Somogy County, home to both bases, produced the highest pro-NATO vote in all of Hungary.

11 December

Early on that morning I flew to Taszar accompanied by Colonels Szurgi and Martinson together with our political/military officer, Kurt Volker. A very happy Jim Wright joined us in greeting the arrival of the first C-130 Cargo flights from Germany carrying personal baggage and few key supplies. In ten days time, the transformation of the air base and supporting facilities would be striking. A tent city was sprouting together with a mess hall, administrative facilities and a complete, state-of-the-art field hospital.

The rain and snow of recent weeks combined with the massive influx of trucks and military vehicles had created a sea of mud. But the army engineers and Brown & Root had already put down wooden planks and begun to build gravel roads and walkways. The tents were dry and the arriving troops found hot water showers in well designed latrines purchased

from Norway, where I was told they had been recently used by the Olympic athletes at Lilihammer.

A few weeks later I was pleased to see that an American company was installing a large number of telephone booths for the servicemen and women to use in calling home to Germany or the US. A PX (Post Exchange Store) was already up and running and plans were underway to add an exercise equipment facility as well as a chapel in the near future. It was apparent that whether our troops were in transit for only 48 hours or selected to remain as permanent party – they were the primary concern of Crouch, Abrams and Wright.

15 December

‘Although last minute surprises and the heavy volume of rail traffic continue to require constant attention by the US Army liaison officer assigned to the Hungarian railroad control centre, the system for receiving and moving US military trains is up and running’, we reported on 15 December. The major cause of delays is simply slotting the trains into the existing flow of rail traffic. We have been told that the projected flow of 20 trains per day from Germany is likely to overload the capacity of the rail networks in Croatia and southern Hungary. ‘At the same time’, we noted, ‘the first truck convoys have reached their destinations. Many more are en route. Travelers in western Hungary have reported that virtually all roads are clogged with trucks carrying equipment. This is due in large part to the continuing snowy weather as well as enormous volume of truck traffic. There is now a one and a half hour delay at the Austrian/Hungarian border.’

These not unexpected teething problems were quickly overcome – thanks to Jim Wright’s leadership and the co-operation of Hungarian government and transportation authorities. The sheer numbers are staggering. From 16 December to 14 February, more than 24,000 soldiers, 200,000 tons of cargo and 12,000 pieces of equipment reached Hungary, and subsequently, Bosnia, in the largest overland deployment since 1945. Military equipment included 101 tanks, 251 support military vehicles, 145 aircraft and 57 artillery pieces. To get this done, Wright and his team required 409 train trips delivering 7,340 freight cars, 507 bus voyages, 1,770 cargo trucks and about 750 C-17 Galaxy cargo aircraft flights. Cargo flights were featured in the early stages of deployment in order to deliver tanks and other protective armor, but the bulk of the deployment – personnel and cargo – made maximum use of trains, buses and trucks.

THE SAFETY AND COMFORT OF US FORCES

As the weeks flew by, Tazsar more and more took on the appearance of an almost permanent US base – complete with rudimentary gravel roads, an

enormous mess tent, a PX and even a choice of fast foods vendors like Burger King as an alternative to army meals. We would shortly begin to make plans for the young men and women to see other parts of Hungary in the spring – particularly Budapest and Lake Balaton. The Army contracted with Hungarian bus companies to provide free transportation to and from these recreational sites, and the Embassy negotiated special, very low cost rates at leading hotels in both locations. These two day trips – which began after the major troop deployments had been completed – were very popular and trouble-free.

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

20 December

On 20 December, I was privileged to play a central role in an event without precedent in modern Hungarian history. At the invitation of its distinguished Chairman, Imre Mecs, I was invited to speak to the full Parliamentary Defence Committee – a ‘first’ for the United States, and also the first time a foreign diplomat has been so honoured. I was aware, of course, that the invitation came to me as the representative of the United States, but I could not help but think that the Hungarian government and parliamentary officials recognized that I had been attempting to play a constructive and friendly role in furthering our bilateral relationship.

Our subsequent cable to Washington reported that

Ambassador Blinken spoke to the full committee and answered questions about the US deployment to Hungary and general US policy on IFOR. This was an historic event, representing the first time a US ambassador had addressed a committee of the Hungarian Parliament. The Ambassador praised the Hungarian Government and Parliament for their exemplary co-operation in supporting IFOR. He said he fully expects that Hungary’s significant contributions will be recognized as Hungary pursues its integration into Western institutions.

The build-up at Taszar continued at full speed during the Christmas/New Year period. Bad weather continued to make life for our forces both in Hungary and Bosnia especially unpleasant, but deployment proceeded without let-up. A sampling of our cables from late December and early January gives some indication of the real problems we and the Hungarians were working to overcome.

29 December

‘The Hungarians raised several concerns about US forces not following through quickly enough in adhering to Hungarian regulations and

establishing mechanisms for handling recurring issues', we reported, 'among the issues raised: US forces putting overweight vehicles into convoys – a concern given the weight bearing capacity of certain roads and bridges. Not yet having signed contracts for paying for public utilities used by US forces. Not having established a means for paying compensation for damages done by US forces.' (These and related issues were all adjudicated in the months to come; compensation for damage to Hungarian property became part of a global financial agreement.) 'These concerns aside', our cable continued, 'Most of the bugs appear to have been worked out of the system for clearing movements into, out of, and through Hungary'.

2 January 1996

On 2 January, Defense Secretary William Perry, CJCS Shalikashvili, and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General George Joulwan paid the first high level visit to Taszar. They were greeted by Generals Crouch, Abrams and Wright who were living at the new base. The day was cold and murky, but spirits were high. Our troops were delighted to welcome their visitors, and I was particularly struck by the warmth our soldiers felt towards Perry and Shalikashvili. More than 15 minutes was taken up with their posing for group photographs, quite a contrast to my experience during World War II. At that time, enlisted personnel stayed as far away from officers as possible. The notion that they would cue up to be photographed with top brass would then have seemed very far-fetched.

Our cable to Washington reported that,

Perry, Shalikashvili and Joulwan expressed to Defense Minister Keleti and Hungarian Armed Forces Commander Deak, the 'appreciation of the US Government and the American people for Hungary's support of the US forces'. Secretary Perry said that from the beginning, it was clear that the US bases in Hungary would be the key link in the entire operation and that our deployment would not have been possible without them. In response to a press inquiry, Perry said that through its actions in support of IFOR and the US forces, Hungary is rapidly fulfilling the requirements for NATO membership. The visit received excellent press coverage and was another important step in strengthening the US-Hungarian partnership in facilitating the IFOR deployment.

A PRESIDENTIAL VISIT; PLANNING FOR SURPRISES

3 January

News had begun to trickle through to the effect that President Clinton would be coming to Bosnia and the IFOR bases in Hungary, as well, early in the

New Year. Anticipating a White House request for possible speech or 'talking points' for use in meetings with Hungarian officials, I cabled National Security Council Senior Director Dan Fried (now US Ambassador to Poland) with the following suggestions:

With Hungary's support, after just 30 days, roughly 65 per cent of the US deployment has been completed. To be specific, Hungary has helped the US move over 12,000 troops, 200 trains, 400 airplane flights, and over 700 supply trucks through Hungary. The United States and the American people are deeply grateful for Hungary's extraordinary efforts to support the US forces. We would like in particular to offer our profound thanks to the Hungarian people for their patience and understanding. Together we have overcome a myriad of obstacles and made the implementation of the Dayton Accords possible.

This was essentially what President Clinton said when he came to Taszar, on 13 January.

A Presidential visit is always a very special event. Advance planning, an Embassy/White House advance team joint exercise, focuses the mind. Many ambassadors past and present, have a jaundiced view of Presidential advance teams, complaining about their indifference to local advice as well as their failure to show the Embassy proper respect. But Budapest during my ambassadorship, had only positive experiences. Whether readying for visits by President Clinton (December 1994 and January 1996), Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State Christopher, or Secretaries of Defense Perry and Cohen, we found their advance squads pleasant to deal with, very professional and always courteous. The planning process is by definition tedious and the scheduling is sometimes excessively rigid and minutia-bound. Yet the effort is necessary, both to maximize the use of limited time constraints and, of course, to always focus on the top priority, the visitor's security.

We now learned that President Clinton's visit to Tuzla (Bosnia) and Taszar was set for Saturday, 13 January. The basic plan was for the President first to visit US troops near Tuzla, the front line and then stop off at Taszar to tour the base, speak to US personnel and hold a brief bilateral meeting with Hungarian leaders. These priorities together with weather conditions argued for Tuzla in the morning followed by Taszar in the early afternoon – perhaps 1:30 or 2pm – allowing the presidential party to leave Hungary during daylight hours.

However, Tuzla, notorious for difficult weather amid its valley topography, posed a special problem. Many mornings in December 1995 and early January 1996, Tuzla airport was closed by dense fog until 11am

or 12 noon. The planning therefore, required flexibility. The President's advance team and the US military in Bosnia and Hungary agreed that the special Presidential aircraft would first attempt to land in Tuzla with Taszar scheduled for early afternoon.

The possibility remained that the order of visits might have to be reversed at almost the last moment – if conditions in Tuzla so dictated. This complicated life for our Embassy. For I was to escort the Hungarian President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Defence Minister, and their top aides, to Taszar by plane – a 35-minutes flight from the Budapest airport. I had two aircraft at my disposal; our own C-12 and a sister plane borrowed from the US Air Force. The Hungarian officials would assemble at the VIP lounge at Budapest's Ferihegyi airport 30 minutes before the departure time – estimated to be 1pm.

The problem, however, was what to do if the order of the President's trip had to be revised at almost the last moment, which would require all of us to assemble at the Budapest airport at 9am.

12 January

I arranged with my military attachés to advise me by 7am if plans were being changed. And, of course, the Hungarian dignitaries would also have to be called. But if we heard nothing by 7am, then the takeoff from Budapest for Taszar at 1pm was on. My wife Vera and I put our 'Taszar clothes' out Friday night, to save time, and went to bed prepared for any eventuality.

13 January

Saturday morning dawned bright and sunny – the first good weather in several weeks. I arose at 7am; watched the clock advance to 8.45am with no telephone call. It's 'go' for the afternoon departure for Tazsar, I told Vera, and we ate a leisurely breakfast.

Then at 9am, my phone rang. After circling fog bound Tuzsla for some time, the President's pilots decided that they have to go to Hungary first after all; this decision coming almost two hours after the planned deadline. We would have to try and be at the airport in one hour – a 40-minutes drive from my residence and as well as those of the President, Prime Minister and other Hungarian dignitaries.

Could the Hungarians be notified in time, I asked? Having not heard by 7am, they must have assumed that the scheduled assembly at Ferihegy just before 1pm, was on. This was a problem, but we had no choice. All the phone calls were being made; only Defence Minister Keleti who was in the Taszar area attending a pig killing, might be unreachable. Vera and I scrambled; called our driver, dressed and dashed for the airport. To my great

relief, most of the Hungarians were already there and the rest were expected momentarily. Shortly after 10, we boarded our twin aircraft – having divided the Hungarian government between our two planes as a matter of prudence, and took off for Taszar. If the Hungarians thought we had staged this last minute confusion to make some sort of diplomatic point, they were too polite to say so.

The weather at Taszar was fair and breezy. Greeting us on the runway, to my surprise, were Dick Holbrooke, appropriately decked out in Russian calf length boots, and television anchorman Dan Rather, who seemed bemused and relaxed to be off camera in an unfamiliar but friendly environment. The Hungarian leaders and my small team were bundled into a small military convoy and rushed off to the Taszar administration building just in time to catch up with the President, who had obviously enjoyed his tour of the base and visit with our troops in the huge mess tent. And Hungarian Defense Minister Keleti, reached by his mobile phone, joined us as well, fresh from the pig farm. On another happy note, we also found my son Antony, the President's senior foreign policy speechwriter, on hand to greet us.

Almost as memorable as the scramble to get to Taszar to meet the President, was the sartorial issue – what to wear when meeting the President of the United States at a NATO base in Hungary. It had occurred to me about a week before the planned visit, that I should try and learn what the President would prefer in the matter of dress; business suits or sports attire. I asked my public affairs officer and Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) to find out from the presidential advance team which was now at Taszar.

The answer was 'informal'. Certainly no suits or ties. Zipper jackets or sports wear were recommended because this is the way President Clinton would dress – he usually wore a bomber jacket when visiting US forces in the field. Word was passed, accordingly, to the Hungarian government through its Foreign Ministry. So much for that, I thought.

But at 9.45pm Friday night 12 January, I was called by DCM Gadsden. The President's advance team, leaving no stone unturned, or in this case, no button unbuttoned, had just telephoned to ask that I remind the Hungarian dignitaries once more that suits and ties were out, to avoid any embarrassment. Would I therefore call Foreign Minister Kovacs to remind him to remind his President and Prime Minister about tomorrow's dress code.

It was now almost 10pm – and I was not thrilled with this assignment, but I telephoned Foreign Minister Kovacs at his home. 'Laszlo', I said, 'I apologize for disturbing you so late in the evening, but the President's advance team has just asked me to remind you and your colleagues not to wear suits and ties. And, Laci, I have seen you sporting a very smart black leather jacket around town on weekends. Why don't you wear that?'

He did and Hungary's President, Prime Minister and Cabinet Officers without exception turned up appropriately in sporting attire. No one commented on this bizarre American behaviour except the witty and debonair Deputy Foreign State Secretary, Ferenc Somogyi, who, pointing to his nifty parka with the 'made in USA' label asked, 'Mr Ambassador, do you think my jacket is NATO compatible?'

TAKING STOCK

19 January

On 19 January, we were ready to provide Washington with a summary of reactions to President Clinton's 13 January stop at Taszar. 'Senior Hungarian officials told us', we reported, 'that they were very pleased with President Clinton's January 13th visit to the US base at Taszar, the early arrival and departure did not hurt the success of the meeting or the positive press coverage.' Both Hungarian political and military officials reported that 'they were pleased with the bilateral meetings and the subsequent tour of the base arranged by US forces'.

20 January

On 20–21 January a truly historical event took place; for the first time since their exodus in 1990, Russian troops en route to serve in Bosnia under US IFOR command, passed through Hungary via Taszar. This went virtually unremarked in Hungary, although what must have been going through the minds of Prime Minister Horn or Defense Secretary Keleti, can only be imagined. But it seemed clear to me that they must have taken great satisfaction in knowing that post-1990 Hungarian foreign policies and most importantly, Hungary's decision to cast its lot with NATO – were proven to be beneficial to Hungary.

LOOKING BACK: THE LESSONS LEARNED

The events I have described from 2 November 1995 to 20 January 1996, took place four years ago. Since then:

The IFOR operation in Bosnia became the Stabilization Force (SFOR). After a period of false starts, the process set in motion at Dayton has produced impressive results. Ethnic violence and the sources that nourished it, were effectively shut down. SFOR restored responsibility and control to those individuals and institutions that supported Dayton. The 1995 actions taken at Dayton, Budapest and Taszar, now appeared to be paying dividends as the Bosnian people begin to realize the advantages of mutual accommodation.

The US intermediate staging base has remained active throughout 1997 and since 1998 with a much reduced permanent garrison. Fortunately, it remained under US control because NATO's opposition to Serbia's ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Hungary's formal admission to NATO – both occurring in March 1999 – thrust Taszar into the forefront once more as NATO's principal airbase north of Serbia.

In July 1996, Hungary, along with Poland and the Czech Republic was formally invited to apply for full NATO membership. On 16 November 1997, the Hungarian people in a popular referendum, overwhelmingly voted to join NATO, and in April 1998, the US Senate, after serious debate, approved NATO membership for the three invitees – by voting to ratify the required treaties with each applicant.

In May 1998, the Hungarian people voted out the Horn-led Socialist government, replacing it with a coalition headed by 36-year old Victor Orban and his Young Democrat Party. The new government has continued the pro-NATO policies of its predecessor. It appears unlikely that any changes in Hungarian foreign or defense policy – at least in substance – will emerge. In March 1999 Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland were formally admitted to NATO in ceremonies held at the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri.

What lessons can be drawn from these events; how did the challenges faced and the measures taken by all parties concerned fare?

First and foremost I believe that the United States is and must remain a European power, in its own interest as well as in the interest of peace and stability in Europe. When the US withdraws, bad things happen. The Europeans, who are making remarkable progress in building economic unity, remain indecisive or conflicted in issues involving national security and the projection of power. Self-interest and history continue to block real European multinational physical security without strong US leadership on the ground. Our intervention in Bosnia through NATO was both wise and effective. Both concept and implementation deserve high marks.

By establishing its forward staging area in Hungary – a non-NATO country lacking a contiguous border with a NATO member – the geographic argument for withholding NATO membership from Hungary was demolished. The lesson learned from Taszar and Kaposvar is that that political institutions, the rule of law, and a desire to settle disputes with neighbours only by peaceful means, are far more important than geographic location. They greatly helped define NATO's new role in a time of fluidity and uncertainty. What had been purely a defensive alliance against Soviet aggression, now became the principal keeper of peace and setter of national and international standards of behavior.

The political framework and climate of a country are the key elements in its ability to operate successfully within an alliance of democratic countries. Hungary had both the will and the parliamentary system needed to work closely and harmoniously with NATO.

Diplomacy without the backing of military power is greatly handicapped. But military force, without the employment of diplomacy and political skills, is also likely to fail badly. Fortunately, both the US State Department and the Defense Department, together with the President's National Security team, understand fully why diplomacy and the potential for use of military action must mutually reinforce one another.

Finally, the US military is a superb and unequaled institution whose performance, both military and political – deserves our admiration and support. Working with our armed forces, as I learned in 1995–96, is rewarding and reassuring; they invariably do what they say they will do, and their dedication to American values and the democratic process can only be admired. The American people, and certainly our President and our Hungarian NATO ally, owe our armed forces their thanks and appreciation.

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