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A tale of four students and the Atlantic Alliance: a pact for freedom

Let's imagine two Italian students in their twenties in 1948.

Their country has been destroyed by a disastrous war adventure. A country reduced in ruins and poverty, extremely polarized, but full of passion and determination to recover. One of them, Luigi, is supporting the development of a liberal democratic system allied to the Americans which have liberated Italy. The other one, Giovanni, believes in the ideals represented by the Soviet Union, which was expanding its power over Central and Eastern Europe. In the Italian political scene the forces close to the Western Allies prevailed after a fierce electoral competition.

Meanwhile, not only Italy was divided, but all the continent was experiencing a much more dramatic separation: *“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an “iron curtain” has descended across the continent.”* With these words Winston Churchill, in his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri on March 1946, prepared the way for the NATO alliance and a Western plan for defense against Soviet encroachment. The city of Trieste mentioned by Churchill is at the Eastern border of Italy. In 1948 the city was not yet recovered to the Italian sovereignty. It suffered the Nazi occupation with the shameful activity of the German concentration camp of the Risiera di San Saba and later, soon after the end of the war, its hills have been the tragical set of the infamous ethnic killings of thousands of Italian civilian citizens by the troops of the communist Yugoslav regime of Tito.

Both of our young Italian students were at the right side of the curtain, the side of the free world. They kept their different opinions and were able to freely express them, they enjoyed the huge social and economic miracle of their country. After few decades their children considered the existence of the NATO alliance as something taken for granted and accepted also by the child of the student who in 1949 was demonstrating against it.

And now let's imagine another student at the end of the '40s.

Bronislaw is in the wrong side of the “Iron Curtain”. He and his country, Poland, have no responsibilities for this. Poland suffered in the most cruel way the German occupation and the extermination of its Jewish population. The end of the war soon implied for Poland and other countries condemned by their geography the loss of an authentic sovereignty, the fall under the Soviet sphere of influence, the oppression under a communist regime. Bronislaw spent decades of his life in much poorer conditions than his Italian peers. He had a very limited possibility to travel and express his opinions. His government was part of a military alliance called the Warsaw Pact created in contrast to NATO. But, after forty years of division from his peers, our Polish fictional character will eventually be free to travel and meet his Italian peers and for his grandchildren it will be natural to be part of the alliance of the free world: NATO.

The fall of the “Iron Curtain” implied the reunification of Europe, the end of the Warsaw Pact and of the communist regimes as well as the accession to NATO of countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Nations which consider the Alliance as the best guarantee of their regained freedom and independence and their new prosperity.

The fall of the “Iron Curtain” had its iconic moment 30 years ago, on November 1989, with the fall of its infamous symbol: the Berlin Wall. A joyous moment for me. I was moved watching the images of thousands of East German citizens trespassing the barrier of terror erected by the

communist regime, the wall which had few checkpoints used for the passage of some Westerners to East, but not the other way around. In the '70s I was a student of the free world and I crossed the famous Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin. In 1989 I was celebrating with millions of Europeans the huge change for our continent. It was a celebration of liberty for all of us, real people, I'm no more referring to fictional characters, but to the European citizens. Nowadays, we are more and more highlighting the importance of identities: the end of Cold War was the rediscovery of a common European identity made of Dante and Beethoven as much as of Petöfi and Mickiewicz. We should never forget these passages of our history and their historical roots.

We kept our freedom and we have been able to eventually share it with the rest of Europe thanks to an Alliance of 12 nations, with Italy as one of its founders in 1949, which developed a structured and powerful political and military organization, NATO, the most successful alliance of history. An alliance surviving and actually thriving after 70 years. Never in history of mankind an alliance lasted for 70 years. Usually, military alliances lasted few years, the time to fight a war, the short period of coincidence of interests of the involved countries.

At the beginning of the 90s NATO allies could have considered their mission accomplished and dissolve the organization because of lack of enemies. It didn't happen. NATO has now 29 allies, soon 30 with the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia, and many countries are looking at it to develop partnerships which are considered valuable. The reason of such a great success lies in the adaptability of the Alliance because of its good organization but especially because its continuity has been always coupled with an evolution grounded on the ideals stated in the Washington Treaty, the founding act of the Atlantic Pact. The preamble of Treaty states that the signatory countries "*reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.*" We often speak about the difference among European countries and the difficult relationship between America and the nations of our continent. This is no new at all. We always experienced different positions and the Alliance was founded on a so-called "Transatlantic Bargain" between the two shores of the ocean. Also the issue of "burden sharing" between the US and the Europeans is well rooted in the history of the Alliance. But what is much more important is the awareness of being part of a community of values and sharing the need to be protected, to defend our way of living.

From 11/9 to 9/11, from the "end of history" to the "age of uncertainty".

The Cold War is over, but the world is still a dangerous place divided in different fields. Europe is free and the "Iron Curtain" doesn't exist anymore, but the threats around us are real, not all the peoples enjoy our freedoms, not all the students are on the right side of the curtain.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was not the end of history, predicted by Francis Fukuyama, but the course of events actually accelerated in a destabilizing direction, a late accomplishment not only in economics but also in politics of the "age of uncertainty" envisioned much earlier by John Kenneth Galbraith.

During the 90s the conflicts in former Yugoslavia brought again cruel wars in the heart of Europe. NATO became involved in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo. It was the beginning of a new core task for the Alliance: crisis management. NATO's involvement in stabilizing the Western Balkans was in a line of continuity with the fundamental goals of the Alliance to ensure our security and protect human rights, at the same time this commitment has played a key role in the evolution of the organization after the end of the Cold War.

During the Cold War the big task was linked to article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which states that an attack on one member of the Alliance is an attack on all its members. It has proved a formidable and effective tool of deterrence. But in the unstable world which followed the Cold War, not only we have to continue to collectively defend ourselves and deter all possible adversaries, but we need to actively employ an appropriate mix of political and military tools to help manage developing crisis, stop conflicts and consolidate stability in order to preserve the Euro-Atlantic security.

Therefore, the years between November 9, 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and September 11, 2001 (the attacks at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon) were not the “Age of Aquarius” and NATO continued to demonstrate its value. Its membership was highly valued by a large number of new Allies and while the old core task of collective defense continued to be strongly appreciated, the new one of crisis management was rapidly developing.

Then came September 11 and we really experienced the feeling of living an historic turn point. America was under attack. Actually, all of us were attacked because of our way of living. After having defeated nazism and communism we faced the challenge of the Islamist fanatics who want to annihilate our very systems, the values enshrined in the preamble of the Washington Treaty.

I was in New York on that day which changed my understanding of my mission. We should never forget that on that day we felt all New Yorkers. A key of our victory in the Cold War was the Euro-Atlantic unity, this solidarity was again evident after September 11, when for the first and only time NATO invoked article 5. Shortly after NATO engaged in its most challenging and complex operation, and a large number of troops, many of them Italians, went to Afghanistan, the place which hosted the bases of the terrorists who attacked us on September 11, a large and strategic country whose people was hostage of a fanatic regime which oppressed an ancient and rich culture and the entire women population.

And here comes the story of a girl. Sharbat (a fictional name for a girl who could represent millions of Afghan women) was not a student. Under the Taliban regime girls were not allowed to study, women were no more than objects obliged to follow cruel norms of behavior in their daily life. At the end of 2001 the legitimate government of Afghanistan took again control of Kabul and in the following years, with the support of the international community and of NATO missions, the country has slowly changed. It remains a country struggling with poverty and security threats, but there have been huge humanitarian efforts and development assistance to improve the living conditions, the country is no more the safe heaven for terrorism, there have been political elections, hundreds of thousands of Afghans, both girls and boys, enjoyed their basic human right to receive an education. Thanks to the training activities of our troops the Afghan Army is increasingly effective in defending the country and its institutions. There are still huge problems, but much has been done. After 2002 Sharbat went to school, she had training opportunities in Italian institutions and she became a medical doctor.

Luigi, Giovanni, Bronislaw and their children as well as Sharbat maybe never met, but it is possible that them and other members of their families had opportunities to work together being part of a large community of people committed to a better future for Afghanistan under the auspices of a large coalition of countries involved in the Nato-led Resolute Support Mission. A commitment of 39 NATO and partner countries which gave very concrete results for the Afghan people in terms of human rights, wellbeing and security.

A regional alliance facing global challenges.

The attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent operations in Afghanistan highlighted a trend which is more and more important. The Alliance remains a regional one, Nato doesn't want became the policeman of the world and this should not happen, but the world is getting smaller and we have to face global challenges.

This is also part of the ability of the Alliance to keep the pace with the transformations of the international environment. Therefore, after collective defense and crisis management, a third core task emerged for NATO: cooperative security. The Alliance is affected by, and can affect, political and security developments beyond its borders. It is therefore engaging actively to enhance international security through partnerships with relevant countries and other international organizations. In this framework NATO developed partnerships with countries next to our Southern borders. For Italy the relationship with the countries of the Mediterranean Dialogue (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) is particularly important. We are now celebrating the 25 years of the Mediterranean Dialogue, a unique format which i.a. gives opportunities of dialogue not only between Euro-Atlantic nations and other countries of the Mediterranean basin but

has also the merit of including together Israel and some Arab countries. NATO is dedicated to promote security in a region which is of crucial importance not only for Italy. Fight against terrorism is a priority for all of us and we know that the Southern shores of Mediterranean are a crucial terrain where we have to cooperate with our partners in order to reach our common goals. Their stability and prosperity are essential for our security. We all share, in the Mediterranean area as well as in the larger Euro-Atlantic community, the concerns regarding terrorism, spreading of violent extremism and the consequences of illegal migration trafficking. In a similar way and with similar features of dialogue and inclusiveness 15 years ago NATO and four countries of the Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) started the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. These initiatives have proved very concrete tools to promote practical security cooperation in an area which is of great importance for Italy and the Euro-Atlantic community.

Looking toward the future we can be confident that the continuity represented by the persistent need to defend our values and the ability to adapt to new developments will ensure a long life to the Atlantic Alliance. We have to face new challenges, which not necessarily are new threats but certainly are characteristic aspects of the XXI century. New big powers with global interests have emerged. One of them is China, with its presence in Africa and its huge trade importance with repercussions on the sea activities.

New big and powerful scientific developments are challenging all aspects of human life and the very nature of our existence as human beings. All this has great repercussions on our security and our ability to control the development of conflicts, therefore on our decision making procedures. I'm referring not only to technological evolution, with new weapons such as the hypersonic missiles, but especially to the different applications of artificial intelligence for instance on autonomous weapons.

Here we are facing at the same time scientific, technological, political and ethical challenges. The community of the free peoples of the Western civilization has been able to win the great threats of the XX century. We can also overcome the new and existential challenges of this century thanks to an old weapon which is never short of ammunitions, but has the capacity to strengthen itself when we use it: educational dialogue. AESI, the European Association for International Studies, can play an important role in opening the minds and the hearts of students with different backgrounds who will be the leaders of our community and our partner countries.