

NATO IN THE TRUMP ERA

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President Trump called NATO “obsolete.” Is it?

The answer is a qualified “no.” NATO’s long history as the cornerstone of post-war stability in Europe, while the Soviet Union existed, invests it with a special aura. But after the fall of “existing socialism in one country,” this aura has become frayed. NATO needs radical redefinition, which has not occurred despite endless talk about how coalition strategy should be articulated anew in the post-Soviet era.

European members appear unwilling to spark the necessary debate. The result has been a haphazard expansion of NATO’s founding concept to include intervention outside the NATO area “in the interest of peace.” The bombing of former Yugoslavia and the slow burning disaster in Afghanistan demonstrate what such “peace missions” mean “on the ground.” Choosing to expand NATO’s mission without much thought was a risky decision spawned by all-round confusion on what to do next.

Can “Trumpism” push NATO to begin a renewal effort?

Early on in the Trump election campaign, two things became abundantly clear: Donald Trump is an iconoclast. And Donald Trump won’t pull any punches on what he believes must be done.

NATO needs to adjust to both of these facts. How to achieve this adjustment remains to be seen. A new “narrative,” i.e. concept, spelling out the alliance’s redefining its security commitments and the ways and means to achieve them, is a must.

Trump did not hesitate to criticize America's allies in Europe and elsewhere in language too blunt for the liking of many. "Trumpism" is introducing a new world order in international security relations and is stirring the waters in ways never seen since 1945.

Meantime, Europeans have very little to show re. their assumed commitment to the Alliance: for years they have taken the axe to defense budgets and done almost nothing to catch up with advancements in military technologies and combat doctrine. They have little to stand on when Trump blames them for slacking.

One encouraging sign for NATO adherents, however, comes from Trump's very first official talks with another head of state. British PM Theresa May, during her visit to Washington on January 27, reassured all her talks with Trump proved the new president is "100 hundred percent" behind NATO.

Furthermore, the new U.S. Defense Secretary, retired general James Mattis, is a staunch NATO defender. Trump and Mattis are in excellent terms--and the U.S. armed forces are elated to see one of their own at the driver's seat (the incumbent Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, USMC, has served under Mattis's command.) The ball, as they say, is now in the Europeans' court. NATO needs fine tuning to Trumpism's sense of urgency for action.

Already, the daily stride of the new president is taxing a system used to slow pace and even slower adjustment to new challenges. One unmistakable sign of how those who oppose him try react to Trumpist push for change is the deluge of news stories by mainstream media in America and Europe claiming to show how *every step* of the Trump administration presages catastrophe for the United States and the world. NATO should search for solutions outside this fabricated and sensationalist gloom-and-doom "fake news" environment.

Some insist Trump has a grudge against the Alliance.

We will continue to hear such nonsense well into the future as the new administration continues to defenestrate rusted policies of the past. Trump's main objection to the current state of NATO is the reluctance of the majority of its members to keep defense spending above 2 percent of GDP.

The U.S. contribution to NATO is three times as much as all NATO European members combined. The second biggest spender after the U.S. is bankrupt Greece. With defense expenditure standing at 2.38 of her GDP, Greece spends more than France and

Germany, the main keepers of the debtor's prison these two countries created (with a little help from their friends and the IMF) in 2010 especially for the misbehaving cradle of democracy. U.S. calls for more NATO defense spending routinely fall on deaf European ears. Trump has made clear this state of affairs will have to stop.

Europe is now in disarray amid the rise of anti-EU and anti-neoliberal political movements. Isn't this a sensitive time to force the NATO issue?

If there is an old lesson in politics that lesson says there is never a "wrong time" if those who demand reform have the political clout to cause, or even strong arm, necessary changes.

Trump's threat to stop footing the bill for Europe's defense had immediate effect: it mobilized no other than Mrs. Merkel but produced the wrong reaction: the German chancellor, fixated on the idea of a European military force, called for more action on creating a "European army" to counteract Trump's threat.

Even novices in the business would tell you that duplicating NATO is not only a budgetary nightmare, but also a poor military idea to boot. If indeed the Europeans are so concerned about what they see as a rising expansionist Russia, for example, they should be focusing on *what is in place* and *not what could be created from scratch*. It is obvious Mrs. Merkel is again using her political "election tongue," fearing the upcoming German general poll, instead of the policy language appropriate for addressing this globally vital strategic question.

Is there any chance for finding common ground between Washington and the European capitals on common defense?

They say that where there is a will there is (almost) always a way.

President Trump's obvious dislike of Europeans enjoying a free lunch at the expense of a gargantuan U.S. defense budget is coupled with his natural tendency to think like any other successful businessman. He is always watching for the figures and how the figures add up to shape the budget. He believes, with merit, no other indicator but the willingness to spend is best proof of European commitment to common defense. He has suggested future NATO summits should include separate meetings of European economic ministers to discuss burden sharing and how to make it into a standard programmatic Alliance procedure.

Defense Secretary Mattis, on the other hand, has been in touch with the NATO secretary general to reiterate U.S. commitment to the alliance. A good guess is the Trump

administration will use the old method of carrot-and-stick, allowing Trump's abrupt "Twitter directness" to deliver policy primers and Mattis and other government officials to carry out the day-to-day business of smoothing out the necessary negotiations and agreeing on details.

Trumpism is a radical departure from the previous U.S. administration's wavering ways, best demonstrated in Syria, not to mention the routine formula of U.S. presidents trying to couch harsh realities in lofty war-of-ideas language better suited for postgraduate government seminars at Ivy League schools.

President Trump has expressed the view Russia may cooperate with the U.S. in battling the world's bad guys. At the same time, several NATO members express fears Russia has expansionist purposes that could endanger their territorial integrity. How do we approach this seeming contradiction?

As these lines are drawn, Trump prepares to have his first telephone talk with Russian president Putin. Speaking after his meeting with the British PM, the new president was cautiously optimistic about Russia saying he hoped he and Putin could strike a "fantastic relationship." But, then again, he added, we will have to wait and see how all this plays out.

When it comes to Russia, Trump will have his hands full with both American hawks and the Europeans including the former Soviet satellites of eastern Europe who fear a Russian invasion. Berlin and European capitals, for example, went along with Obama in siding with Ukraine's "democratic" revolution that pushed out a pro-Russian president and brought to power a regime with strong ties to Ukrainian nationalists, who retain a soft spot for the country's World War Two collaboration with Nazi Germany.

The insistent efforts to draw this "new" Ukraine into the EU and NATO directly challenged Russia's security back yard. It was juvenile, to say the least, to expect Moscow would watch indifferently at this direct Western attempt on the Russian border. What followed was the Crimea take-over and support of the secession of the Donbass. Wisely, neither the Obama administration nor the Europeans, somewhat hypocritically clamoring for "democracy" in Kiev, attempted to interfere with Russia's intervention realizing that any such action could trigger a European and, possibly, a global war.

In Putin Trump may discover an "enemy" with surprisingly pragmatic tendencies. Any success in this endeavor though won't be accepted by his opponents without a bitter fight. We will see a renewed deluge of allegations Trump is compromised by Russian dark ops, yet Trump has already demonstrated how he is not detracted by such attacks. If the Putin

attempt does work, on the other hand, Trump will go down in history as the only U.S. president who scuttled accepted postwar wisdom and turned the Cold War legacy on its head.

Isn't this view too optimistic? Isn't Russia a growing threat as Putin tries to re-establish his country's global role?

If you ask any Cold War warrior, whether retired, semi-retired or active, not to mention leaders like Mrs. Merkel, attempting to entice former KGB agent Putin is an invitation to disaster if the one doing the wooing does not act from a position of absolute power. Trump's hecklers predict that any failed attempt in negotiating with Russia could scuttle the Trump presidency, not to mention the hopes of the West for a reasonably peaceful world.

Closer to the ground, however, there are two basic conditions any U.S. negotiation with Moscow should not overlook. First, Russia has not grown past the nostalgia for the Soviet glory days, and remains the only country in the world which can destroy America in a nuclear war; and, second, U.S. and Russian strategic interests are fundamentally opposite *but* without the sharp relief which defined the East-West Cold War days.

Putin, on the other hand, is hardly an unbreakable cipher as many in the West prefer to describe him. He is a fairly typical *Russian* leader dedicated to command principles which emphasize continuity, security, control, avoidance of rash action, and trying to outfox an opponent through deception.

While it would be exaggerated to claim Putin can be "read" with ease, his actions do tend to follow identifiable patterns familiar to the trained eye. Trump does not possess this trained eye (yet) but he does have people who can do the reading with sufficient success. It would be of crucial importance to seek the advice of such "readers" and set aside, for the moment, his tendency to go in alone and act on instinct.

Right now, it appears that Trump and Putin may share a personal chemistry that could make a round of reasonable exchange of "working points" possible. Any such step alone would be a significant improvement over the disastrous Obama legacy in U.S.-Russian relations. And any further negotiation should proceed from the premise that the Cold War is behind us and George Kennan's 1947 "X-Article" in *Foreign Affairs*, on how to contain the USSR, is history.

The present world is too fragile to resurrect confrontation, let alone to begin speaking of a Russian “rollback.” We should not overlook NATO’s “enhanced security” tactics, which involve constant wartime mobilization exercises aimed at Russia, as a policy needing priority re-assessment *if* an attempt at building mutual confidence is attempted. Donald Trump does have a unique and historical opportunity to redefine U.S.-Russian relations as the pivot of lasting stability.