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Article Review 172

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Review by **Davis Ellison, King's College London**

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Jeffrey Michaels's piece on Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty is a welcome addition to the often stale historical scholarship on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The article engages with two fundamental questions at the core of debates surrounding NATO: how long is the treaty actually meant to last; and how do NATO members actually go about disengaging from the alliance if they choose to do so? Through a historical examination of the negotiations leading to NATO's Article 13 and its subsequent legacy Michaels's article highlights the fact that the answers to both questions are often part of complex diplomatic maneuvering.

NATO studies are often divisible between two camps: the pessimists and the optimists. Pessimists make well-worn arguments about the mishandling of NATO enlargement, failures and weaknesses in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and of NATO's relationship with Russia.¹ Optimists make similarly worn-out arguments against the pessimists that NATO enlargement was entirely benign, that NATO resolved the Balkan conflicts, and that the Afghanistan failure cannot be pinned on NATO alone.² Both camps are engaged in a roundabout circle of arguing. That is why studies like "An Indefinite Alliance" are so welcome, in that they contribute something new to a field that has grown monotonous by focusing on a new angle, this time the debates around the Alliance's duration.

The article is particularly well-timed, being published as NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary and ahead of a NATO Summit in Washington, DC. It is also in advance of a highly consequential US presidential election, one which could bring the famously NATO-sceptic (to put it lightly) Donald Trump back to the White House. With foreign policy debates surrounding Washington's commitments to allies around the world, Michaels's historical examination of the NATO treaty itself is useful in both the historical and

¹ Ted Galen Carpenter, *NATO: Dangerous Dinosaur* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2019); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Macmillan, 2018).

² Mark Webber, James Sperling, and Martin A. Smith, *What's Wrong with NATO and How to Fix It* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021); Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Pax Transatlantica: America and Europe in the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

present policy contexts, as it opens the door to questions of how a state actually could begin to walk back its alliance commitments, an event that has few contemporary examples (two being the Carter administration's withdrawal from the alliance with Taiwan and the Trump and Biden administration's abandonment of the Afghan government).

The core of the article is the text of Article 13 of the NATO treaty, which reads:

After the Treaty has been in force for twenty years, any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties of the deposit of each notice of denunciation.³

Michaels makes the argument that the negotiation of the text above and its subsequent legacy goes far beyond legalese and is instead a highly consequential piece of text which shapes governments' and legislatures' perceptions of their alliance commitment. Indeed, Michaels writes that issues of alliance duration and withdrawal procedures show the "important role played by strategic considerations that are unique to defence pacts compared to other types of treaties" (389).

This argument should be quite intuitive. However, given that much of the contemporary NATO scholarship in security studies and diplomatic history is polemical rather than analytical, and is driven by appeals to the alliance as a community of transatlantic "values" rather than a military-strategic alliance, the interests-based analysis can get lost. The negotiations between Washington, London, Paris, Ottawa, and The Hague which Michaels explores at length puts this on full display. Each of the capitals above argued from a strategic logic that was either focused on limiting alliance duration to avoid overstretch (Washington and Ottawa) or essentially making the alliance permanent to achieve a "stronger psychological effect" (London and Paris, 393). Both camps approached their positions first and foremost from policies that were centered on national interests, while both camps also sought to adjust their policies for the new post-war environment that was characterized by the seemingly long-term division of Europe.

What is perhaps most interesting is how many officials in the early days of the alliance considered it a temporary expedient aimed at the Soviet Union rather than an indefinite commitment of the US to Europe. Washington and Ottawa perceived at the time that should relations improve with the Soviet Union and the United Nations become a more effective forum for dispute resolution, NATO could be dissolved (390-391). These competing interests over expediency and long-term commitments ultimately took the form of the twenty-year initial duration, which left the alliance in a safe position until 1969, a year without any US elections that could derail a reaffirmed commitment.

The evidence presented by Michaels from this period complicates the NATO-approved version of history in which the transatlantic allies almost unanimously committed to a permanent treaty to bind the two continents together. Archival records from Washington, London, Ottawa, and Paris show that this assumption could not be further from the truth. Senior alliance leaders including Canadian foreign

³ "The North Atlantic Treaty" (NATO, 4 April 1949), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

minister Lester Pearson of Canada and US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles questioned the wisdom of a permanent commitment and clearly believed that the deep crisis in US-Soviet relations in the late 1940s would be transitory, rather than be a permanent state of affairs across a spectrum of crises for the coming decades (390-391).

While the treaty's language is itself an interesting piece of NATO's history, far more noteworthy is its legacy. Michaels writes that "not a single member state has voluntarily or involuntarily exited the Alliance" (388). This not to say, as Michaels notes, that states have not tried to disentangle themselves from the alliance at times. The French and Greek governments both left the integrated military command structure for periods of time. Additionally, NATO itself sought to distance itself from an ally that had a significant domestic political change, namely Portugal after the Carnation Revolution dethroned the Salazar dictatorship in April 1974, fearing that the new left-wing government would prove a security threat. The alliance managed this by restricting the flow of classified NATO information to Lisbon during the transition period (397).

These temporary estrangements with France, Greece, and Portugal were seemingly seen at the time as an alternative to an Article 13 withdrawal. Michaels notes that during these periods of tension, Article 13 was avoided through the use of half-measures that avoided a diplomatically costly withdrawal while leaving the door open for a full reconciliation in the future (397). The only contemporary example of such acute tension within NATO regarding possible withdrawals occurred under the Trump administration, with regular challenges occurring between 2017 and 2021 as the US vacillated between engaging with NATO and pushing for increased resources and sudden, unilateral withdrawals such as in the unrealized July 2020 announcement of the removal of 12,000 troops and the European Command Headquarters from Germany.⁴ This was in many respects, however, a reflection of a particularly personal anger from Trump himself towards the German government rather than an expression of any specific attempt to withdraw from the alliance.

Michaels concludes his consideration of Article 13's legacy with a note that although no allies have triggered a full withdrawal, just as much if not more damage can be done from within. As all articles of the treaty are voluntary, it is well within the realm of possibility that an ally including the US could simply refuse to vote in favor of an Article 5 invocation, effectively blocking NATO's ability to collectively act. Should the mutual defense clause be invoked, it is not an inevitability that a NATO response would be military (399). Article 13 does, however, seemingly cause a certain amount of hesitation from the more disruptive states within the alliance given the uncertain diplomatic territory that would follow from its actual invocation.

There is little to critique in this article. Its historical focus and Michaels's narrow scope on Article 13 makes it less incumbent upon the author to engage and reflect on contemporary policy debates surrounding NATO's membership and expansion. Michaels does reflect on NATO in the modern age in the context of a possible second Trump presidency. Connecting this possibility with the 1966 French and 1974 Greek withdrawals, Michaels argues that NATO could very well have difficult days ahead. Indeed, while these

⁴ Julian Bolger, "US to Pull 12,000 Troops out of Germany as Trump Blasts 'delinquent' Berlin," *The Guardian*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/29/us-germany-troop-withdrawal-donald-trump>.

earlier examples show a NATO that can successfully muddle through crises, none of these turning points in alliance history involved the actual withdrawal of the largest and most capable member.

It is not an exaggeration to argue that a total US withdrawal, an abnegation of Article 5, or a withdrawal from the military structure would cripple NATO. Despite a flurry of articles and analyses arguing for “Trump-proofing” or “future-proofing” NATO from a possible American abandonment, this is largely wishful thinking.⁵ Should the United States completely withdraw from NATO or from the integrated military structure, remove all forces from Europe, or abnegate Article 5 in the event of an attack, this would reshape the face of the alliance. No current European forces can make up for the loss of American troops on the continent, and the independent nuclear deterrents of the United Kingdom and France would come under pressure to extend an unprecedented deterrent to their remaining allies. Conversely, Washington would lose its primary forum for diplomatic engagement and leverage within Europe. Inasmuch as Washington can claim to have security interests in Europe, it pursues them almost exclusively within the political and strategic context of NATO, even when it does so bilaterally.

This does open the door for discussions on what a European security architecture without America looks like. History provides some examples, such as the abortive European Defense Community, and Europhiles will surely point to the possibilities of the European Union stepping in. At the recent NATO Summit in Washington DC, one speaker alluded to thinking about “NATO’s next 75 years.”⁶ This should be flipped. There needs to be far more serious thinking about coming decades in which there is *no* NATO.

Beyond these policy implications, Michaels’s work opens possibilities for fascinating new avenues for research on perceptions of NATO. What were the accession negotiations like with the Greeks, Turks, West Germans, and Spanish from their own internal archive and oral history perspectives (i.e., not filtered through State Department or Foreign Office reporting)? How did these states perceive the duration of the treaty as they joined? How did these conversations compare with the later negotiations for Central and Eastern European states to join? By honing in on the question of duration, the major issues of national interest, alliance commitments, and even prospects for future European security architectures become far clearer.

There are indeed open counterfactuals from this period as well that demonstrate the usefulness of a “duration focused” approach to revisiting NATO’s history.⁷ For example, what would have happened to NATO in 1969 if Soviet forces had never invaded Czechoslovakia or if the invasion had triggered a war between Warsaw Pact states? Would the allies have reaffirmed their fealty to the treaty or gone their own

⁵ Arancha Gonzalez Laya et al., “Trump-Proofing Europe: How the Continent Can Prepare for American Abandonment,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trump-proofing-europe>; Roland Oliphant, “Why ‘Trump-Proofing’ Nato Is a Priority,” *The Telegraph*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/07/09/why-the-trump-proofing-of-nato-is-a-priority/>.

⁶ Heather Conley, Secretary Antony J. Blinken At the 2024 NATO Public Forum, 10 July 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-2024-nato-public-forum/>.

⁷ Tobias Bunde, “The Future of the West: What If the United States Pulls Out of NATO?” in *War Time: Temporality and the Decline of Western Military Power*, Edited by Sten Rynning, Olivier Schmitt, and Amelie Theussen (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

way? Cross-referencing discussions in 1968-1969 on NATO's Article 13 and the Czechoslovak crisis may offer some interesting results.⁸

Michaels's work on the history of the NATO treaty is indeed a welcome addition to the relatively uninventive sub-field of "NATO studies." By opening up the historical black boxes and scratching at the alliance's pain points that stem from the treaty's inherent weaknesses, this article offers a more focused picture of how states and alliance officials have navigated strategy-making and crises over the decades begins to emerge. Importantly, it pulls the NATO-interested reader back into a world of governments pursuing their own interests and benefits rather than a value-laden discussion that dominates so much of the Atlanticist community's historical discussions on NATO. The NATO treaty is truly a living document, and not merely a memorial to some nostalgic era of cross-Atlantic ties.

Davis Ellison is a PhD candidate at King's College London and a strategic analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. His dissertation research focuses on the internal dynamics of NATO political and military structures both during and after the Cold War, using this lens as an explanatory variable for important NATO shifts over time. He has written widely on civil-military relations, arms control, and national security policymaking.

⁸ Harlan Cleveland, "NATO After the Invasion," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 January 1969, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/czech-republic/1969-01-01/nato-after-invasion>; Leo J. Reddy, "NATO Before and After Czechoslovak Crisis," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 2, no. 2 (1969): 93-99.