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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-historic President

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In the presidential election of 2020, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was given a reprieve from what could very well have been a death sentence in the four years to follow. Reelection of Donald Trump would have given the anti-NATO American president the opportunity to cancel the American commitment to the mutual defense provision of the alliance and pull U.S. forces out of Europe, both of which had been suggested as possibilities during his first term.

A retrospective look at my contribution to the 2017 “America and the World” series¹ suggests that the essay was a very accurate portrayal of the challenges that would arise given Trump’s approach to allies and alliances. The article’s title signals the uncontroversial assertion that NATO is an “historic alliance” and the now-well documented observation that Donald Trump was an “a-historic president.” The analysis drew largely on evidence of Trump’s views that were articulated in the campaign leading up to his election and the first few months of his presidency. Virtually everything documented in that time period suggested what in fact was observed throughout his term in office: his malignant narcissism, admiration for ‘strong’ leaders, starting with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin; very limited understanding of history and diplomacy; transactional approach to international relations; belief that NATO and European Union members were taking advantage of the United States and owed back dues to NATO and the United States; primary focus on his interpretation of the burden-sharing issue, and dismissive attitude toward the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5 collective defense provision.

The essay opened by observing that Trump was a “unique president” who rejected “past practice, procedures and principles.” His attitude and performance over the full course of his presidency confirmed this assessment. It was notably underlined when, clearly having lost his re-election campaign, he refused to start the process of transition to the administration of president-elect Joe Biden.

The essay then recorded another observation that was fully demonstrated over the next four years. It became clear that Trump’s narcissism was a more important factor for understanding the president than any political orientation or ideology. Trump had over the years bounced back and forth between the Republican and Democratic parties, apparently based on his perception of what would be most helpful to him at any one time. After becoming president, he basically took control of the Republican Party and turned it into the Trump party, abandoning huge chunks of traditional Republican policies and preferences, including most importantly U.S. leadership of the West and support for NATO.

Throughout his term in office, Trump’s approach to NATO ran counter to the traditional roles of the presidency and Congress that had obtained since the alliance was founded in 1949. Throughout the years, the Congress regularly complained about burden-sharing while the administrations of both parties defended the Alliance. As the essay reported,

While U.S. administrations – Democratic and Republican – sought ways to contain the financial burdens and to get the Europeans to compensate the United States for some of NATO’s costs, the established pattern persisted into the post-Cold War years. Over all these years, the Congress did most of the complaining while successive presidents of both parties urged allies to do more but largely defended the alliance and its costs as necessary for U.S. national interests.

¹ <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AM.pdf>.

Even though Trump shifted the normal role of the presidency toward skepticism about NATO, he did reflect some overall continuity in U.S. concern about burden-sharing. Even the very Atlanticist administration of President Barack Obama had wanted the Europeans to take on more of alliance defense burdens. In fact, on his way out of office Obama's Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned of the potential for erosion of the U.S. NATO commitment if the European allies didn't substantially improve their contributions to the alliance.² You could say that Gates predicted Trump. And Trump did not fall short in this projection.

Warnings of Trump's disruptive attitude toward NATO came early in the 2016 campaign. In March 2016 Trump charged that NATO had become "obsolete" because it did not focus on the dangers of terrorism. Trump went on to declare that not only does NATO not "cover terrorism like it's supposed to" but it also does not include the countries most relevant to fighting the Islamic State and terrorism in general. The essay speculated that "... when he referred to NATO not having the "right" countries to make it effective in fighting terrorism, he presumably was thinking of Russia, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps a few more non-NATO countries."

The essay noted that when NATO announced in June 2016 creation of the position of "...Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence, intended to improve coordination of intelligence assessment on Russia as well as on the Middle East and terrorism,"³ Trump claimed that the change had come in response to his complaints,⁴ while in fact a NATO official confirmed the alliance had been considering creating this post "for some time" before Trump's criticism.⁵

NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, however, did not openly contradict Trump, thereby establishing a pattern that Stoltenberg would follow throughout the Trump presidency of letting Trump take credit for positive NATO-related developments, even if their origins were more complicated than a knee-jerk reaction to Trump's complaints.

In fact, perhaps the most notable institutional success for NATO during the Trump presidency was how well he was played by Stoltenberg. Trump ignored the fact that the NATO commitment to increasing defense budgets toward the goal of 2% of gross national product was first agreed at the NATO summit held in Wales in 2014, when Obama was president. The goal was intended as part of the answer to Russia's seizure of the Crimea region of Ukraine. After Trump came to office, the allies continued their uneven movement toward the goal, but Stoltenberg consistently credited Trump's burden-sharing pressure as responsible for whatever results could be shown. And, Trump ate it up. During his speech to the 2020 Republican nominating convention, Trump bragged that "our NATO partners, as an example, were very far behind in their defense payments, but at my strong urging, they agreed to pay \$130 billion more a year...." He added that Stoltenberg was "amazed, after watching for so many years and said that President Trump did what no-one else was able to do."⁶ Managing Trump's relationship with NATO may be recorded as Stoltenberg's primary accomplishment during his service as secretary general.

Trump's approach to NATO was one of the leading elements of his "America First" approach that came closest to defining American foreign policy during his term. In an April 2016 major foreign policy speech to the Center for the National Interest,⁷ in which Trump laid out his "American First" theme, he declared "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves. We have no choice."

² Thom Shanker, "Defense Secretary Warns NATO of 'Dim Future'," *The New York Times*, 10 June 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/europe/11gates.html>.

³ Julian E. Barnes, "NATO Moving to Create New Intelligence Chief Post Aim is to help improve U.S., European information sharing on terrorism and other threats," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-considers-new-intelligence-chief-post-1464968453>.

⁴ Donald J. Trump, twitter.com, 6 June 2016.

⁵ Louis Nelson, "NATO: Trump Had Nothing to Do with Intel Post," *Politico*, 8 June 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/donald-trump-nato-intelligence-post-224081>.

⁶ Joe Gould, "Trump repeats questionable NATO funding claims in GOP convention speech," *Defense News*, 28 August 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/08/28/trump-boosts-questionable-nato-funding-claims-in-gop-convention-speech/>.

⁷ Donald J. Trump, "Trump on Foreign Policy," *National Interest*, 27 April 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>.

Trump's warning called into the question the core Article 5 commitment of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty that allies would consider an attack on any ally as an attack on themselves. Even though the treaty left open what allies would do in response to such an attack, its commitment remained the essential life blood of the alliance. My essay noted that "No U.S. administration, Republican or Democratic, has ever called NATO's mutual defense commitment into question." Although Trump did not follow through on his bombshell Article 5 threat, those who were watching closely continued to worry that he might do so in a second term and destroy the alliance.

After Trump came to office in 2017, apparently influenced by the experienced counsel of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, he avoided direct attacks on the collective defense commitment, but he continued to display his a-historic and generally-uninformed approach to the defense spending issue. Germany and its leader, Chancellor Angela Merkel, were his prime targets. In a joint press conference following the President's first meeting with Merkel, Trump said he strongly supported NATO but "Many nations owe vast sums of money from past years, and it is very unfair to the United States. These nations must pay what they owe."⁸

The essay explained that the key national "contributions" to NATO were the defense budgets they approved and the forces they deployed, and that the notion of allies owing 'past dues' is completely inconsistent with the terms of the North Atlantic Treaty and the allies' practice over the last 70 years.⁹ Trump nonetheless persisted after Merkel headed back to Berlin, commenting "... Germany owes vast sums of money to NATO & the United States must be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!"¹⁰

Right up to the end of his presidency, Trump attacked Germany and Merkel. In some ways, Trump's antagonism toward Merkel seemed very personal, perhaps reflecting his widely recognized discomfort with strong women. In 2020, he finally unleashed a major weapon against this ally that he regarded as delinquent in paying its "NATO dues." In the run-up to the November elections, Trump announced that he was ordering several troop deployment reductions, including the removal of some 12,000 U.S. soldiers from their postings in Germany.¹¹

Another theme that was well-established in the first months of Trump's presidency and continued to the end of his one term is his unexplained permissive and friendly attitude toward Russian President Vladimir Putin. One important paragraph in the essay addressed the Putin connection:

Trump's attitude toward NATO cannot be divorced from his peculiar perspective on Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. Trump has studiously avoided critiquing either Russia or President Putin. That fact, combined with the on-going investigations of links between the Trump campaign and Russia's clandestine efforts to influence the outcome of the US elections in Trump's favor, has cast a continuing cloud over Trump's approach to NATO. How can allies put their trust in an American president who seems conflicted about one of the most important threats to many NATO nations and to Western interests and values more generally?

Today, serious questions remain about Trump's permissive attitude toward Putin. Concern about the impact of his attitude on American and Western interests peaked in July 2018 when Trump, meeting with Putin in Helsinki, Finland, dismissed the views of the American intelligence community in favor of Putin's "reassurances" that Russia had not intervened in the 2016 American elections.¹² At that point, the concern noted in my 2017 article became a full-blown national security issue. Trump has continued to refer to the investigation of his

⁸ Jeff Mason and Andreas Rinke, "In First Trump-Merkel Meeting, Awkward Body Language and a Quip," *Reuters*, 17 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-germany-idUSKBN16O0FM>.

⁹ For a good survey of how NATO "contributions" are made and measured, see: Peter Baker, "Trump Says NATO Allies Don't Pay Their Share. Is That True?" *The New York Times*, 26 May 20, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/europe/nato-trump-spending.html>.

¹⁰ Donald J. Trump, twitter.com, 18 March 2017.

¹¹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. Will Cut 12,000 Forces in Germany," *The New York Times*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/world/europe/us-troops-nato-germany.html>.

¹² BBC News, "Trump Sides with Russia against FBI at Helsinki Summit," 16 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>.

campaign's connections to Russia a "hoax." But nothing he has done has mitigated concerns of those outside his circle. And, for the entire course of his presidency he refused to utter a single critical word about either Putin or Russia.

This essay eschewed more dramatic conclusions that I and others subsequently put forward during in the remainder of Trump's presidency, and it attempted to find an optimistic angle on the future, noting that "...the good news is that a substantial majority of Americans (and Europeans) believe that the transatlantic alliance remains in their country's interest."¹³

The years between the drafting of this essay and the 2020 election have demonstrated in full the dangers presented by the Trump approach to NATO and U.S. national interests more generally. The dangers became even more evident when Trump refused to accept the outcome of the November election and ultimately incited a violent crowd of supporters to attack the Capitol on January 6, 2021 when the Congress was convened to give its blessing to the Electoral College outcome certifying Joe Biden as president. Whether the country will be able to undo the damage to the alliance and restore respect for and trust in the United States as its leading member will be a critical challenge confronting the new administration and president.

Postscript

I was honored to have been asked to contribute to this series, and fortunate to have been invited to do so. The research that went into this article led to an even more detailed assessment of Trump's impact on international security and American interests in my 2018 book, *Transatlantic Traumas: Has Illiberalism brought the West to the Brink of Collapse?*¹⁴ Further expansion has taken place in my latest book, *Defense of the West: Transatlantic Security from Truman to Trump*,¹⁵ in which I carry the analysis forward to speculate on how a second Trump term could further threaten the alliance.

Finally, the critique of Trump reflected in my contributions to public speaking in the United States and Europe and on social media got the attention of the Trump administration. In December 2019, the U.S. Ambassador to Denmark blocked my participation in a Copenhagen conference intended to celebrate NATO's 70th anniversary. The action produced a small international media fire storm,¹⁶ Danish opposition to the ban, and cancellation of the meeting. Happily, Danish sponsors, freed of their link to the embassy, brought me to Denmark in March 2020 to deliver my message of concern – a message with roots firmly planted in this article.

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¹³ Bruce Stokes, "NATO's Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic, European faith in American military support largely unchanged," Pew Research Center, 25 May 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/05/23/natos-image-improves-on-both-sides-of-atlantic/>.

¹⁴ Stanley R. Sloan, *Transatlantic Traumas: Has Illiberalism Brought the West to the Brink of Collapse?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Sloan, *Defense of the West: Transatlantic Security from Truman to Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

¹⁶ Theo Armus, "A NATO Expert Criticized Trump on Twitter. So a U.S. Ambassador Barred Him from Speaking at a Conference." *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/12/09/stanley-sloan-carla-sands-denmark-embassy-speech-canceled-trump/>.