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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *Donald Trump and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Deal*

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Donald Trump's disdain for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is no secret. Since launching his presidential bid in June 2015, he has offered up memorable soundbites and caustic tweets, touching off a steady parade of transatlantic tizzies. On the campaign trail in 2016, the reality television star-turned-Republican presidential candidate famously lambasted the Atlantic Alliance as "obsolete."<sup>1</sup>

Once in office, the hits kept coming. After months of will-he, won't-he speculation about whether or not Trump would endorse Article V, the guarantee at the heart of the North Atlantic Treaty, aides indicated that he would finally do so in a high-profile speech at NATO Headquarters in May 2017 to dedicate a new September 11 monument. Instead, at the allied gathering, Trump turned on his fellow leaders, berating them and, at one point, pushing past Dusko Markovic, the prime minister of Montenegro. "You're a world leader at a meeting of dignitaries and you act like they just called your number at KFC," late night host Seth Meyers joked of the incident. "Me, that's mine, the 12 piece."<sup>2</sup>

In July 2018, in an interview with Tucker Carlson, Trump cast yet more doubt on his commitment to Article V. After the Fox News host asked why, if Montenegro were attacked, "should my son go to Montenegro to defend it?" "I understand what you're saying," Trump replied. "I've asked the same question."<sup>3</sup> Reports in January 2019 suggested that the president had contemplated walking away from the Alliance entirely the previous summer.<sup>4</sup> Should Trump have secured a second term, former administration officials warned that the president might follow through on his earlier musings and pull the United States out of NATO.<sup>5</sup>

Chief among Trump's complaints was a sense that NATO was somehow unfair – a bad deal for the United States. Taking up the editors' encouragement to reflect on the effects of Trump's presidency, I'd like to think about Trump's perennial complaints about the United States bearing the burden of the alliance and where they fit in NATO's history more broadly. What was new about Trump's critique? What wasn't? And, what does this curious blend of old and new, in style and substance, tell us about the history of the Atlantic Alliance and the U.S. role therein?

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game,'" *New York Times*, April 2, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Schmidt, "Breaking Down Trump's 'Shove,'" *Washington Post*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/05/26/breaking-down-trumps-shove-the-internet-debates-and-montenegros-leader-shrugs/>.

<sup>3</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, "Trump Goes After Montenegro, a 'Tiny Country' With 'Aggressive People,'" *The Atlantic*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/trump-montenegro/565475/>.

<sup>4</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew McDonald, "John Bolton: Trump could pull US out of NATO," *Politico (Europe)*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/john-bolton-trump-could-pull-us-out-of-nato/>.

At a campaign stop in Racine, Wisconsin in 2016, the then-candidate doubled down on his earlier comments, ripping into Washington's allies for failing to pay "their fair share." "That means," he insisted, "we are protecting them, giving them military protection and other things, and they're ripping off the United States. And you know what we do? Nothing."<sup>6</sup> "We're protecting those guys," Trump remarked at another campaign appearance, "and we're supposed to get into World War III for all these countries that aren't paying their fair share."<sup>7</sup>

An August 2019 tweet summed up these sentiments even more succinctly: "@NATO, very unfair to the United States!"<sup>8</sup> Even in more moderate moments, the president remained fixated on the costs borne by Washington. "It got to be unfair for the United States," he noted in a December 2019 press conference with NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in which Stoltenberg praised Trump's "strong commitment" to the Alliance. The source of that "unfair" arrangement? That the United States "was paying a disproportionate amount."<sup>9</sup>

Trump's transactional thinking should hardly come as a surprise. On this, he has been remarkably consistent. In 1987, he spent almost \$100,000 to take out a full-page spread in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Boston Globe* to rail against standing U.S. policy. Though primarily aimed at Japan, the advertisement's insistence that "America should stop paying to defend countries that can afford to defend themselves" sounds strikingly familiar to observers of Trump's NATO policy three decades later.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, that attitude has elicited more than a few scoffs over the past few years. Scholars and pundits familiar with NATO have missed few opportunities to point out that Trump's various takes reflected a dismal understanding of how the Atlantic Alliance actually works.<sup>11</sup> It is not, in fact, a protection racket. As one 2018 *Time* headline put it, "Donald Trump Says NATO Allies Owe the U.S. Money. He's Wrong."<sup>12</sup>

Trump's style differed markedly from that of his predecessors. That much is obvious, patently so.

Trump was more than happy to blast allies in public, armed with his now-defunct Twitter account. With cries of "Just doesn't work!" and "Fairness!," he regularly returned to the question of sharing the burden and touted his ability to make change happen.<sup>13</sup> "I got NATO countries to pay 530 Billion Dollars a year more, and the U.S. less," he posted on December 8, 2019, one in a string of tweets on the

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game,'" *The New York Times*.

<sup>7</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay, Wisconsin," August 5, 2016, The American Presidency Project, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-ki-convention-center-green-bay-wisconsin>.

<sup>8</sup> Trump, Twitter post, August 21, 2019, 1:43 PM EST. All Tweets, now deleted from Twitter, have been accessed at the Trump Twitter Archive (<https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>).

<sup>9</sup> "Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg After 1:1 Meeting, London, United Kingdom," December 3, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-stoltenberg-11-meeting-london-united-kingdom/>.

<sup>10</sup> On Trump's attitudes toward Japan from a historical perspective, see Jennifer M. Miller, "Let's Not be Laughed at Anymore: Donald Trump and Japan from the 1980s to the Present," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 25:2 (2018): 138-68.

<sup>11</sup> See, for one such example, Stanley R. Sloan, "Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-Historic President," H-Diplo, June 8, 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AM-NATO>.

<sup>12</sup> W.J. Hennigan, "Donald Trump Says NATO Allies Owe the U.S. Money. He's Wrong," *Time*, July 11, 2018, <https://time.com/5335111/donald-trump-nato-spending-facts/>.

<sup>13</sup> Trump, Twitter post, July 10, 2018, 2:52 PM EST; Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, December 8, 2018, 7:52 AM EST.

subject surrounding NATO's seventieth anniversary summit in London, before going on to rail that the "Fake News Media" had refused to report on these successes.<sup>14</sup>

Trump's grievances, aired in Twitter broadsides and rapid-fire reactions, were often petty and personal. Take, for example, the spat that erupted between the president and his French counterpart, President Emmanuel Macron, in November 2018, shortly after Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the INF Treaty. At Verdun, Macron insisted that "we must have a Europe that can defend itself on its own without relying only on the United States."<sup>15</sup> Trump took to the internet to respond, tweeting "Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly!"<sup>16</sup> A few days later, the president circled back. "Emmanuel Macron suggests building its own army to protect Europe against the U.S., China and Russia," Trump tweeted on November 13. "But it was Germany in World Wars One & Two - How did that work out for France? They were starting to learn German in Paris before the U.S. came along. Pay for NATO or not!"<sup>17</sup>

Nor was Macron his only target. In late 2019, after the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation trimmed Trump's cameo in *Home Alone 2* to make room for advertisements, the president tweeted a link to news coverage from a Fox News affiliate in Tampa Bay along with the caption, "I guess Justin T," a reference to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "doesn't much like my making him pay up on NATO or Trade!"<sup>18</sup> When the G-7 met in June 2018, Trump reportedly lobbed a handful of Starburst candies onto the table in front of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, before remarking "Here, Angela. Don't say I never give you anything."<sup>19</sup>

Beyond a seeming lack of filter or sense of decorum, Trump's outspoken critiques so often stunned because they fit squarely within a broader message. His willingness to complain about key U.S. allies in public could easily be seen as an extension of his political brand and more generic slogans trotted out by the president like "America First."<sup>20</sup>

Yet, Trump's attitudes toward NATO seemed to find little sustained support among the electorate. Recent polling suggests strong bipartisan backing for the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>21</sup> And, in some quarters, support for NATO might even be viewed as an outright rejection of Trump's politics writ large. When the 2020 election was finally called for Trump's Democratic challenger, Joe Biden, at least one enthusiastic denizen of Washington, D.C., took to the streets wrapped in the NATO flag.<sup>22</sup>

As no shortage of think-pieces have reminded us in recent years, there are historical antecedents to the substance of Trump's complaints, if not their style. In 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, to give one popular example, warned of a "dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress — and in the American body politic writ large — to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their

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<sup>14</sup> Trump, Twitter post, December 8, 2019, 2:59 PM EST.

<sup>15</sup> "France's Macron Pushes for 'True European Army'," BBC News, November 6, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46108633>.

<sup>16</sup> Trump, Twitter post, November 9, 2018, 4:10 PM EST.

<sup>17</sup> Trump, Twitter post, November 13, 2018, 6:50 AM EST.

<sup>18</sup> Trump, Twitter post, December 26, 2019, 7:03 PM EST. Quoted Tweet was FOX 13 Tampa Bay, Twitter post, December 26, 2019, 12:15 PM EST.

<sup>19</sup> Cristina Maza, "Donald Trump Threw Starburst Candies at Angela Merkel, Said 'Don't Say I Never Give You Anything,'" *Newsweek*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-threw-starburst-candies-angela-merkel-dont-say-i-never-give-you-987178>.

<sup>20</sup> On the idea of "America First," see Melvyn P. Leffler and William I. Hitchcock, eds., "America First: The Past and Future of An Idea," *Passport* (September 2018): 33-51.

<sup>21</sup> For some recent polling, Joshua Busby et al., "Coming Together or Coming Apart? Attitudes of Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders and the Public in the Trump Era," Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2020): 5.

<sup>22</sup> Idrees Ali, Twitter post, November 7, 2020, 2:03 PM EST, <https://twitter.com/idreesali114/status/1325151813969043461?s=20>.

own defense.”<sup>23</sup> When Trump’s first Secretary of Defense James Mattis attended his first NATO meeting in February 2017, he referenced Gates’s earlier arguments as he made the case for increased allied spending, telling colleagues that “Americans cannot care more for your children’s future security than you do.”<sup>24</sup>

Complaining about the defense contributions of NATO’s other members is a time-honored tradition in Washington, long predating Mattis and Gates. President Dwight D. Eisenhower griped that the Europeans were “close to ‘making a sucker out of Uncle Sam’.”<sup>25</sup> “You have to pay your fair share,” Barack Obama reportedly told British Prime Minister David Cameron, in a phrase that could have easily come out of the mouth of his successor.<sup>26</sup> Examples of this abound. “Literally every U.S. defense secretary,” as Kori Schake reminded readers in early 2017, “has pleaded, cajoled, darkly warned, and threatened allies with the dire reckoning to come if Americans continue to shoulder this much of the common burden.”<sup>27</sup>

Administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have struggled to secure greater defense contributions from fellow NATO members. President John F. Kennedy explicitly pushed for a more equitable division of expenditures between the Western allies,<sup>28</sup> while Jimmy Carter’s team pressed for each to reach a spending target of 3 percent, though how, exactly, that figure would be calculated remained a mystery. Press reports indicated that the Carter administration had used no less than three different formulas to calculate that percentage in the period between June 1977 and January 1978 alone.<sup>29</sup> This problem might seem familiar: it’s a kind of math that continues to confound policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic.

These efforts – and countless similar initiatives over the decades – have run up against a basic tension. These policies’ architects have weighed their desire to share the burden more equitably against reservations about what a more equitable transatlantic bargain might actually mean for policy – and for U.S. power and influence – should they ultimately succeed. Here, again, we could point to a host of examples where talk of European strategic autonomy or schemes for Franco-German cooperation rattled policymakers in Washington who, despite their pleas for Europeans to do more, found little of comfort in discussions of what that might mean in practice.

None of these underlying tensions has evaporated with a change of administration. To be sure, Trump’s tough talk framed the Biden administration’s early moves in obvious ways. On the campaign trail, reassurance was the Democrat’s watchword. And, in office, Biden and his foreign policy advisers have offered repeated promises that the United States is “back.” (A serious flashback to 2015 – and the early rhetoric of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s victorious Liberal Party – for this Canadian.) “America is back, the transatlantic alliance is back,” Biden promised listeners, speaking to the Munich Security Conference in February 2021. “I know the past few years have strained

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Thom Shanker, “Defense Secretary Warns NATO of ‘Dim’ Future,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/europe/11gates.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Helene Cooper, “Defense Secretary Mattis Tells NATO Allies to Spend More, or Else,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/world/europe/jim-mattis-nato-trump.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “Memorandum of Conference with President Eisenhower,” November 4, 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, vol. VII, part 1, ed. Ronald D. Landa et al. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), doc. 226.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kori Schake, “NATO’s in Crisis (Again!),” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/16/natos-in-crisis-again/>.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Kennedy, “The President’s News Conference,” March 1, 1961, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy 1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 142.

<sup>29</sup> “That ‘3 Percent’ for Defense,” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1978.

and tested our transatlantic relationship,” he continued, “but the United States is determined — determined — to re-engage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trust and leadership.”<sup>30</sup>

Biden’s remarks at the Conference made no mention of Trump, but they scarcely needed to for his audience to connect the dots. The core message is unmistakable. After all, reengagement requires someone to have disengaged at an earlier point. And early administration pronouncements tout plans to “reaffirm, invest in, and modernize” the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>31</sup>

But, what does it mean for the United States to be ‘back’?

Here, the Biden administration will confront familiar questions about how the burden should be shouldered within the Atlantic Alliance, what constitutes each ally’s ‘fair share,’ and how to reconcile U.S. leadership – something the Biden team has made clear is a critical part of the United States being ‘back’ – with increases in other allies’ defense expenditures. Already, in February 2021, Macron reiterated the need for enhanced European capabilities, maintaining that such a move would strengthen the Atlantic Alliance as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

Will those in Washington agree? Desirable in the abstract, the prospect of a more powerful and autonomous Europe has not always been a welcome development.

NATO’s history, to paraphrase a popular aphorism, is just one damn crisis after another. Trump’s term in office was certainly no different. But I remain struck by the crisis that did not occur. The United States, for all the president’s complaints and press speculation to the contrary, did not walk away from the Atlantic Alliance. Why? What made NATO different from the other international agreements that the president also tagged as unfair deals?

There are, of course, limits to what we can know now. But, as more and more policymakers speak out, archivists tape back together various bits of administration documents, and historians delve into the record, the pressing issue is how and why that particular dog did not bark.

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<sup>30</sup> “President Biden Remarks to the Munich Security Conference,” February 19, 2021, C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?509174-1/president-biden-addresses-munich-security-conference>.

<sup>31</sup> “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Roula Khalaf, Ben Hall, and Victor Mallet, “Emmanuel Macron: ‘For Me, the Key is Multilateralism that Produces Results’,” *Financial Times*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/d8b9629a-92b1-4e02-92b7-41e9152d56ea>.