

Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-historic President¹

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Published on **8 June 2017** | issforum.org

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5AM>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AM-NATO>

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

NATO is a unique alliance in world history, outlasting its original purpose of deterring the Soviet Union and, in so doing, demonstrating the persistence of the shared values and interests among its members. Donald Trump is a unique president, rejecting past practice, procedures and principles. The interaction between NATO and this president in just a few months has upended decades-old assumptions about the transatlantic alliance and the presidency.²

When one examines President Trump's approach to almost any policy issue, including alliance relations, it is useful to consider the psychological profile that seems to lie behind virtually every policy utterance, speech or, yes, tweet on the subject. This president appears to be motivated by a variety of factors, including the instincts born of a narcissistic personality, his need to be loved, his personal family and financial motivations, and his admiration for 'strong' leaders.

Aspirants to higher office seldom achieve their goals without elevated levels of self-confidence, and American politicians get elected in part by being loved, or at least respected. President Trump's behavior, however, has differed sufficiently from that of any predecessors to entice professional, as well as amateur, psychologists into the public dialogue. Critical assessments have ranged from a "diagnosis" of a narcissistic personality disorder to simply not being a nice person.³ It is also clear that Trump's career as a wealth-endowed investor with

¹ This essay was submitted on 29 May 2017.

² Travis Sanderson, a student at Middlebury College, provided research assistance for this essay.

³ See, for example, Richard A. Friedman, "Is It Time to Call Trump Mentally Ill," *The New York Times*, 17 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/opinion/is-it-time-to-call-trump-mentally-ill.html?_r=0. See also Seth Davin Norrholm, Ph.D. & David M. Reiss, M.D., "Eternal Emperor in His Own Mind: The Distorted Reality of Donald Trump," Huffington Post, 27 May 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/eternal-emperor-in-his-own-mind-the-distorted-reality_us_5929abfee4b07d848fdc0429. For Trump's response to the suggestion that he is not a nice

several children intimately involved in his business world (and now to some extent in his public service role) influences his decision-making framework. His admiration for ‘strong’ leaders, irrespective of their policy or human rights records history, apparently is a product of his experience in the business world—uninformed by standard diplomatic procedure or ‘presidential’ norms.

One reason that analysts and commentators are looking for almost any explanation of Trump’s positions and behaviors is that he doesn’t appear to have come to office with any clear or consistent political ideology. Historically, Trump has bounced back and forth between declared affinity for the Democratic and Republican parties, having donated to candidates of both over time. According to a previous contribution to this series by historian Frank Ninkovich,

... Trump does not have an ideology. This is a serious shortcoming, because an ideology or an articulated world view is essential to effective functioning in the modern world. Though often associated with zealots or narrow doctrinaires, ideology when broadly considered is a much more positive thing than that. It is only through the mediation of a complex, coherently articulated world view that combines hard information (which includes science), historical background, and personal values that one can formulate a strategy that allows us to navigate the world.⁴

Another experienced public policy observer, Hal Brands, agrees that one should not look for ideology to explain Trump and his policy positions, despite Trump’s reliance on the cry ‘American First’ to rally his base. According to Brands, “Mainstream observers have long worried about Trump’s radicalism in foreign policy, but it is his incompetence that may ultimately be our undoing.”⁵

This essay therefore does not search for an ideological or even policy-based explanation for Donald Trump’s approach to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its members. Rather, it traces the evolution of Trump’s approach from his candidacy for the Republican nomination, to the election campaign, and finally during his first four months as president, concluding with participation in his first NATO summit meeting.

Before surveying the contemporary record, a brief comparative historical note may be in order. Throughout the nearly seven decades since NATO’s founding,⁶ U.S. participation in the alliance reflected the fact that the Congress, and particularly the Senate, considered itself a joint manager with the executive branch of the

person, see: George Beahm, *Trump Talk: Donald Trump in His Own Words*, Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2016, p. 32.

⁴ Frank Ninkovich, “Trumpism, History, and the Future of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *The International Security Studies Forum Policy Series*, 18 April 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AD-Ninkovich>.

⁵ Hal Brands, “The Incompetence Doctrine,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 May 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/the-incompetence-doctrine/>.

⁶ NATO’s founding document, The North Atlantic Treaty, was signed by the United States, Canada and 10 West European countries in Washington, D.C. on 4 April 1949. With Montenegro on the verge of joining the alliance in 2017, NATO includes a total of 29 countries.

“transatlantic bargain.”⁷ From the very beginning, the Congressional partner regularly raised questions about the persistent burden-sharing issue. This questioning began with the initial debate in the Senate on whether it should give its advice and consent to the Treaty. The administration of President Harry Truman reassured Senators that the European allies would contribute to their own defense and that the United States would not end up carrying a disproportionate share of the burden.

As the European states recovered from the devastation of World War II, some Senators argued that the Europeans had become capable of defending themselves. Montana’s Senator Mike Mansfield famously promoted resolutions from the mid-1960s into the early 1970s that sought to force administrations to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Europe. 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.

In this area, Trump has already reversed institutional roles with his burden-sharing complaints and his threats to abandon key commitments in the 1949 Treaty. The Congress, in response, has largely assumed the role of NATO-defender, giving strong bipartisan support (the Senate voting 98-2) to a further expansion of the alliance to include the small Balkan state of Montenegro, with some members expressing concern about the new Russian threat to Europe, and wondering why President Trump was not nearly as concerned.⁸ But that is another part of the story.

Candidate Trump’s critique of NATO, and U.S. allies in general, did not come totally out of the blue in the primary campaign. Before that time, there is very little on the public record documenting Trump’s views on NATO, but he did make one major dive into the burdensharing issue when, in 1987, he was considering a run for the presidency. Trump ran an “open letter” in several major newspapers “on why America should stop paying to defend countries that can afford to defend themselves.”⁹

Then, prior to NATO’s May 2012 summit in Chicago, Trump complained that President Obama had not invited Israel to attend.¹⁰ Israel, of course, is not a member of NATO. But many of NATO’s partners had been invited and did attend. The invitation to Israel was vetoed by NATO member Turkey.

⁷ Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 6-7.

⁸ See, for example: Dan Nowicki, “Sen. John McCain: Michael Flynn’s Resignation Highlights Dysfunction, Questions about Russia,” *The Arizona Republic*, 14 February 2017, <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/azdc/2017/02/14/sen-john-mccain-michael-flynn-resignation-highlights-dysfunction-trump/97888784/>.

⁹ Ilan Ben-Meir, “That Time Trump Spent Nearly \$100,000 On an Ad Criticizing U.S. Foreign Policy In 1987,” BuzzFeed News, 10 July 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/ilanbenmeir/that-time-trump-spent-nearly-100000-on-an-ad-criticizing-us?utm_term=.lkZDMGNZE8#.enr7j8l9V6.

¹⁰ Israel, of course, is not a member of NATO but many of NATO’s “Mediterranean Dialogue” and other partners had been invited and did attend. The invitation to Israel was vetoed by NATO member Turkey, with whom

During the campaign, Trump's first major statement on the alliance came in a March 2016 interview with *The Washington Post*.¹¹ In response to a question, Trump called NATO "a good thing," and said he did not want the United States to "pull out," but then went on to suggest that the United States was taking virtually all the burden of responding to Russia's aggression against Ukraine when it was U.S. allies whose security was more affected. The entirety of his NATO comments was set in the framework that also was driving his positions on trade: 'the world is taking advantage of the United States, Uncle Sam has been both overly generous and stupid, we are not as wealthy as we once were, and we need to change all of that.' In NATO's case, he specified,

Why is it that other countries that are in the vicinity of the Ukraine not dealing with—why are we always the one that's leading, potentially the third world war, okay, with Russia? Why are we always the ones that are doing it?... NATO is costing us a fortune and yes, we're protecting Europe but we're spending a lot of money. Number 1, I think the distribution of costs has to be changed.

Trump echoed those views in a CNN "Town Hall" television broadcast the evening that the transcript of the Washington Post interview was published.¹²

In some ways, Trump's going-in position was not that different from Barack Obama's complaint that there were too many "free riders" among American allies,¹³ or the lecture by Robert Gates when he was leaving his position as Secretary of Defense that the maldistribution of burdens in NATO could undermine the U.S. commitment to the alliance.¹⁴ It is also an approach that has for years been promoted by the libertarian CATO research institute,¹⁵ and in fact reflected the view in Trump's 1987 open letter mentioned earlier.

relations had become even more troubled following Israel's attack of a Turkish ship carrying cargo intended for Palestinians, killing 9 Turkish seamen. Celil Sagir, "Turkey blocking Israel's participation in NATO summit," *NATO Source*, 23 April 2012, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/turkey-blocking-israel-s-participation-in-nato-summit>.

¹¹ Post Opinion Staff, "A Transcript of Donald Trump's Meeting with *The Washington Post* Editorial Board," *The Washington Post*, 21 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/03/21/a-transcript-of-donald-trumps-meeting-with-the-washington-post-editorial-board/>.

¹² "The Final Five: Interview with Donald Trump; Interview with Hillary Clinton. Aired 9-10p ET," *CNN*, 21 March 2016, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1603/21/se.02.html>.

¹³ Mark Landler, "Obama Criticizes the 'Free Riders' Among America's Allies," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/world/middleeast/obama-criticizes-the-free-riders-among-americas-allies.html?_r=0.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ See, for example, "NATO/Transatlantic Issues, CATO Institute, <https://www.cato.org/research/natotransatlantic-issues>.

It could be said, therefore, that there is a broad American consensus that the allies should ‘do more.’ However, while the Obama, Gates and CATO perspectives reflected considerable thought, research and experience, even with their differing motivations and bottom lines, Trump’s betrayed a very superficial knowledge of NATO, its founding Treaty, its history, and realities of international and transatlantic relations. It was mainly a complaint that the United States is being treated unfairly by its allies. The position comes from his largely profit-oriented, transactional point of view that underlies the ‘American first’ appeal to his base of support.

The next development of the Trump position came just two days later, when Trump described NATO as “obsolete.”¹⁶ Trump explained, “NATO was set up a long time ago—many, many years ago when things were different.... We were a rich nation then. We had nothing but money. We had nothing but power.” At first blush, this statement seemed to transform Trump’s burden-sharing complaint into a generalization that “NATO is obsolete.” However, on Twitter the following day, he clarified what he meant through his favorite political forum, tweeting “N.A.T.O. is obsolete and must be changed to additionally focus on terrorism as well as some of the things it is currently focused on!”¹⁷ This suggested that his problem with NATO was not only that it costs the United States too much and the allies are not paying their ‘fair share,’ but that NATO is also neglecting his top priority: fighting terrorism in general and the Islamic State in particular.

A few days later Trump expanded on his point, arguing that NATO “...doesn’t really cover terrorism like it’s supposed to. It doesn’t have the right countries. I mean, many of the countries in there aren’t, you know, that you associate with terrorism.”¹⁸ Although he did not clarify, 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.

In June 2016, when NATO announced it was creating the new post of Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence, intended to improve coordination of intelligence assessment on Russia as well as on the Middle East and terrorism,¹⁹ Trump claimed that the change had come in response to his complaints,²⁰ while in fact a

¹⁶ “Complete Donald Trump Interview: NATO, Nukes, Muslim World, and Clinton,” *Bloomberg Politics*, 23 March 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/videos/2016-03-23/complete-trump-interview-nato-nukes-muslims-and-hillary>.

¹⁷ Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, 24 March 2016, 4:47 am, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/712969068396093440>.

¹⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Transcript: Donald Trump’s remarks in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – Part 7,” *WTF*, 5 April 2016, <http://www.whatthefolly.com/2016/04/05/transcript-donald-trumps-remarks-in-milwaukee-wisconsin-part-7/>.

¹⁹ 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>.

²⁰ Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, 6 June 2016, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/739934090690998272>.

NATO official confirmed the alliance had been considering creating this post “for some time” before Trump’s criticism.²¹

Of course, Trump’s terrorism complaint—the foundation for his “obsolete” generalization—totally ignored the fact that NATO had taken on the most demanding active combat mission in its history following 9/11, volunteering to command the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan to which NATO allies and partners contributed thousands of troops to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The list of other NATO activities related to fighting terrorism could go on, and would importantly include 2008 establishment of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia. The primary motivation for the center was provided by the Russian cyber threat to NATO ally Estonia, but its mission became even more important as the Islamic State improved its ability to use cyber weapons and social media against the West.

In other words, while Trump may have been right that NATO could expand its work against terrorism, the alliance was already headed in that direction. His assertions may have added urgency to the process, but they also revealed his ahistorical and superficial understanding of the alliance. His knowledge of NATO’s involvement in terrorism seemed to be based on a single article²² and confirmation bias.

The terrorism-based charge of NATO’s obsolescence also ultimately provided another demonstration of Trump’s narcissistic personality. When NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the White House in April 2017, President Trump bragged that he no longer considered NATO obsolete because the alliance had taken his criticism to heart. In his joint press conference with Stoltenberg, Trump said “I complained about [what NATO can do to fight terrorism] a long time ago, and they made a change and now they do fight terrorism. I said it was obsolete. It's no longer obsolete.”²³ What a transformation.

On 27 April 2016, the third leg of candidate Trump’s NATO stool appeared almost as a logical progression following his charges of inadequate allied defense spending and lack of counter-terrorism efforts. In a major foreign policy speech to the Center for the National Interest,²⁴ in which Trump laid out his ‘American First’ theme, Trump suggested that he would reverse nearly seventy years of US policy toward its NATO Treaty commitment. 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.”

²¹ 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>.

²² Julian E. Barnes, op. cit.

²³ Kevin Liptak and Dan Merica, “Trump Says NATO No Longer ‘Obsolete,’” *CNN*, 12 April 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/12/politics/donald-trump-jens-stoltenberg-nato/>.

²⁴ Donald J. Trump, “Trump on Foreign Policy,” *National Interest*, 27 April 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>.

Trump's statement suggested that for allies not paying their "fair share" of NATO expenses the United States should reconsider whether it would come to their defense if they were attacked. The 1949 North Atlantic Treaty—NATO's founding document—does not specify exactly what each ally will contribute to the alliance. The Treaty's Article 3 suggests simply "the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." But alliance members have all pledged (in Article 5 of the Treaty) that they will regard an attack on any ally as an attack on themselves. This 'mutual defense commitment' is the heart of the alliance. It has been invoked only once: when the NATO allies agreed to come to regard the 9/11 attacks on the United States as an attack on all of them, and offered assistance to their North American ally.

No U.S. administration, Republican or Democratic, has ever called NATO's mutual defense commitment into question. Should President Trump make this part of his administration's foreign policy, it would almost certainly force allies to decide what they would need to do to account for a much less reliable American ally. The prospects for an autonomous European defense system had already potentially lost a key player with 'Brexit,' the British decision to leave the European Union (EU). But even before Trump's November victory, speculation started building about the possibility for an autonomous European nuclear deterrent, an independent German nuclear weapons program, and European accommodation of Russian interests.

After the elections, the European allies were largely left to see what the new administration would bring to the table, in terms of policies and people in key positions.

U.S. allies were somewhat relieved when President Trump did not initially repeat the threat to abandon the U.S. collective defense commitment even though he clearly did not abandon demands for more allied defense spending. When Trump nominated retired General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, the allies interpreted the selection as a possible sign of a return to orthodoxy. But Trump's obvious inclination to 'do a deal' with Russian President Putin and his nomination of Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State strengthened speculation that Trump might direct Tillerson to negotiate a deal, perhaps removing the sanctions imposed on Russia for its 2014 aggression against Ukraine, including annexation of The Crimea.²⁵

On his inaugural visit to NATO headquarters, Secretary Mattis delivered a hybrid model of Trump's NATO policy. Mattis essentially said that the allies must increase defense spending and that failure to do so could have consequences. At a Brussels press conference on 15 February, Mattis said "America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to the alliance, each of your capitals needs to show its support for our common defense."²⁶

²⁵ David Halperin, "Trump-Putin Bromance: Election Hacking, Oil Drilling," *Huffington Post*, 21 February 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-putin-exxon-what-is-russiagate-really-about_us_58ab1473e4b0fa149f9ac902.

²⁶ Dan Lamothe and Michael Birnbaum, "Defense Secretary Mattis Issues New Ultimatum to NATO Allies on Defense Spending," *The Washington Post*, 15 February 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/15/mattis-trumps-defense-secretary-issues-ultimatum-to-nato-allies-on-defense-spending/>.

The Mattis message reaffirmed President Trump's words on allied defense spending and cloaked his threat concerning the U.S. commitment to collective defense in a somewhat more analytical framework, one that sounded like Robert Gates's 2011 warning.

Prior to the Mattis visit to Brussels, Trump had met with British Prime Minister Theresa May. The two appeared to hit it off, and May even said that "Mr, Trump had given strong backing to Nato, an alliance that the president has previously called obsolete."²⁷ Candidate Trump had supported the UK's departure from the European Union, which had been supported narrowly in a popular referendum in the UK in June 2016, and May was now intent on carrying that mandate. That, combined with the UK's position as one of the few NATO countries that was already meeting NATO's agreed 2014 goal of spending at least 2% of GDP on defense by 2024, had set up the two leaders for a successful meeting.

The same could not be said of the circumstances surrounding Trump's first meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. As the leader of the EU's political and economic powerhouse, Merkel also represented one of the leading 'free riders' on American defense efforts, at least from Trump's point of view. The Trump-Merkel discussion on March 17 concluded with a press conference that put the awkward relationship on full view. After avoiding the traditional handshake with Merkel in the Oval Office photo opportunity, Trump declared in the press conference: "I reiterated to Chancellor Merkel my strong support for NATO as well as the need for our NATO allies to pay their fair share for the cost of defense. 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."²⁸

The suggestion that Germany and other allies owed past dues to the alliance, or even to the United States, reflected once again Trump's lack of understanding of how NATO works, or even for what the alliance stands. Allies do not contribute to the alliance by paying dues, other than providing their share of funds to support 'common' programs like NATO infrastructure, including NATO headquarters in Brussels. The main 'contribution' made by each ally is the money spent on their own defense efforts. There is no question that many allies have not spent as much on defense since the end of the Cold War, or even throughout the history of the alliance, as the United States would have liked. But 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.²⁹

²⁷ Barney Henderson and Nick Allen, "Donald Trump Tells Theresa May: 'Brexit Is Going to Be a Wonderful Thing for Your Country' as Two Leaders Hold Hands at White House," *The Telegraph*, 28 January 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/27/theresa-may-meets-donald-trump-white-house-live/>.

²⁸ 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-idUSKBN16O0EM>.

²⁹ 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>.

Despite the facts of the situation, President Trump persisted, tweeting on March 18, after Merkel had headed back to Berlin, “Nevertheless, 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!”³⁰

Finally, 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?

Against this backdrop, a NATO summit meeting was scheduled for 24-25 May, as a highlight of Trump’s first international trip as president, in which he was scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia, Israel, Vatican City, Brussels (for the NATO summit) and Taormina, Italy (for the 43rd G-7 summit). The NATO allies were collectively holding their breath in expectation of more Trump bombast. But Trump’s new national security advisor, the well-respected retired General H.R. McMaster who had replaced discredited Trump nominee retired General Michael Flynn, offered reassurance. Prior to Trump’s departure from Washington, McMaster said “President Trump understands that America first does not mean America alone.... To the contrary, prioritizing American interests means strengthening alliances and partnerships that help us extend our influence and improve the security of the American people.”³¹

The most important test of Trump’s approach to NATO came on 25 May when he participated in a summit of alliance leaders in Brussels. The meeting was technically built around formal dedication of NATO’s shiny new headquarters, but the new facility played second fiddle to the Trump display of America first-ism.

As the date for President Donald Trump’s arrival in Brussels neared, Trump’s White House remained upside down with controversy while, in Brussels, allies worried about how to deal with the unpredictable yet demanding American president. The controversies swirled around issues of interest to NATO – charges of Trump collusion with Russia to affect the presidential election and a Trump dump of classified information into the laps of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russia’s reputed spymaster Ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak.

By the time Trump arrived in Brussels, internal consultations among the allies and with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had produced a strategy designed to please the American president while defending against

³⁰ Donald J. Trump, Twitter posts, 18 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/843088518339612673> and <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/843088518339612673>.

³¹ Noah Bierman, “Trump Prepares for First Overseas Trip, with Anti-globalism at Bay,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-globalist-20170515-story.html>.

his possible assaults on the alliance and individual allies.³² The strategy included limiting the time available for formal presentations (to avoid boring Trump) and avoiding a final ‘declaration’ to avoid potential battles over contentious issues, like burden-sharing and Russia relations.

The visit to NATO headquarters began with dedication of displays at the entrance intended to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 attacks on the United States – the latter being the only time that NATO’s Article 5 has been invoked. In Trump’s remarks, after asking for a moment of silence for the victims of the terrorist attack in Manchester, England earlier in the week, and condemning terrorists, he lit into a critique of defense spending levels of NATO members. His burdensharing remarks did not come as a surprise, as they reflected his previous positions. The big question was whether President Trump would clarify his position on the American commitment to collective defense. According to press reports, “Mr. Trump offered a vague promise to ‘never forsake the friends that stood by our side’ in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks—a pledge that White House officials later said amounted to an affirmation of mutual defense.”³³ This was hardly the ringing endorsement for which the European allies had hoped.

The weak affirmation of collective defense was made even more telling by the fact that, once again, Trump chose not to challenge Russia on its aggression against Ukraine and threats to NATO allies. He focused instead almost entirely on the terrorism and refugee issues. As if to add a punctuation mark to his hard line to the underperforming allies, at one point he pushed his way to the front of the gathering of leaders, physically brushing aside Dusko Markovic, the Prime Minister of Montenegro, scheduled to become NATO’s newest member on 5 June 2017. The great irony, or the explanation, if one is inclined toward conspiratorial thinking, for the rude behavior (replayed all over social media) was that Markovic had led his country through a successful bid to join NATO in the face of strong overt and clandestine Russian opposition.

Before Trump left Brussels, the alliance announced that NATO, as an organization, would formally join the anti-ISIS coalition (all members were already contributing to the effort in one form or another). To demonstrate that they were listening to Trump’s burdensharing complaints, the allies agreed to develop annual national plans for how they intend to meet the 2014 defense investment pledge, covering cash, capabilities and contributions.³⁴

With the summit in the rearview mirror, more turmoil lies ahead, for the alliance as well as for President Trump. The most important consequence of the summit and the G-7 meeting that followed was the reaction of German Chancellor Angela Merkel to her interactions with Trump. In a campaign appearance after the meetings, Merkel said “the days when Europe could rely on others was “over to a certain extent. This is what I

³² Robbie Gramer, “NATO Frantically Tries to Trump-Proof President’s First Visit,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 May 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/15/nato-frantically-tries-to-trump-proof-presidents-first-visit-alliance-europe-brussels/>.

³³ Michael D. Shear, Mark Landler and James Kantermay, “In NATO Speech, Trump Is Vague about Mutual Defense Pledge,” *The New York Times*, 25 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/world/europe/donald-trump-eu-nato.html>.

³⁴ NATO, “NATO Leaders Agree to Do More to Fight Terrorism and Ensure Fairer Burden Sharing,” 25 May 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144154.htm.

have experienced in the last few days.”³⁵ Merkel’s comment, made in the context of the British exit from the EU, Trump’s demands on NATO, and his calling German automakers “very bad”³⁶ suggest that Trump handed Vladimir Putin an important victory in his campaign to split the Western alliance.

Trump’s participation in NATO’s “mini-summit” may eventually be interpreted as an important way station on his learning tour of NATO issues. But it remains to be seen whether the President wants to learn anything that would conflict with his well-established bias and, if he does, whether he will make a good student. The bad news for Atlanticists is that his management of the alliance could last a full four, or even eight, years. He could over time do a lot of damage to the trust and mutual confidence that make that relationship work.

While many Americans share Trump’s view that the burdensharing relationship with all allies—including those in Asia—should be “fairer” to the United States, the good news is that a substantial majority of Americans (and Europeans) believe that the transatlantic alliance remains in their country’s interest.³⁷

If this popular support holds up, it will create pressure on the Trump administration to hue more closely to traditional lines in its alliance policies. It will also provide a foundation on which the transatlantic relationship could be rebuilt in the wake of the Trump disruption.

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³⁵ Henry Farrell, “Thanks to Trump, Germany says it can’t rely on the United States. What does that mean?”, *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/28/thanks-to-trump-germany-says-it-cant-rely-on-america-what-does-that-mean/?utm_term=.def364cdb312.

³⁶ Dalia Fahmy, “Trump: German carmakers VW, BMW, Mercedes ‘very bad’”, *The Detroit News*, 26 May 2017, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/autos/foreign/2017/05/26/german-carmakers/102206934/>.

³⁷ 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/>.