

Trump and NATO: Old Wine in Gold Bottles?

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When future historians write the story of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 2017 is likely to go down as the Year of Sound and Fury. With the arrival of the Donald J. Trump administration, the first two-thirds of the year witnessed an array of nominal zig-zags in United States policy towards the transatlantic alliance that would have been inconceivable for any other U.S. administration. Unsurprisingly, commentators on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to make sense of the shifts, with members of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment particularly scathing in their evaluation of Trump's moves.¹

Emerging from the morass, however, are the outlines of a Trumpian policy towards the transatlantic alliance that contains important elements of continuity with prior U.S. strategy. In particular, and despite biting critiques of the alliance, the Trump administration has married a decision to preserve NATO with steps to minimize the demands placed upon the United States in providing for Europe's defense. This is all standard fare in U.S. grand strategy. Where the administration breaks from past practice, however, is in its refusal to accept the received wisdom on the diplomatic steps needed to operate inside the alliance: where prior administrations accepted that suasion and conciliation were needed to make the alliance operate effectively, the current administration seems to believe that confrontation is the way for the United States to maximize its own interests inside the alliance's framework. The result creates a public impression that Trump's NATO policy is substantively new when, in reality, the main change has been rhetorical and stylistic. In short, the Trump administration seems to have retained the same basic objectives towards NATO as preceding administrations, but also has vastly different ideas over how to obtain these ends. Whether this change matters

¹ For these critiques, see Jacob Pramuk, "George W. Bush's NATO Ambassador Slams Trump's Visit with Alliance," CNBC.com, 26 May 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/26/trump-nato-visit-gets-bad-reviews-from-former-ambassadors.html>; James Goldgeier, "Trump to Europe: You're on Your Own," *The Conversation*, 2 June 2017, <https://theconversation.com/trump-to-europe-youre-on-your-own-78786>; AOL News, "Former Vice President Joe Biden Blasts Trump Administration's 'Romance with Putin,'" 22 May 2017, <https://www.aol.com/article/news/2017/03/22/joe-biden-blasts-trump-administration-romance-putin-russia/21948143/>.

for the resiliency of NATO, is likely to succeed or fail, and whether the policy is in fact a consistent strategy remains to be determined.

Trump and NATO: An Evolving Relationship

Trump arrived in office more overtly critical of NATO than any American president in the last seventy years. During the 2016 election, Trump made few efforts to sugar-coat his concerns with transatlantic relations. Not only was the alliance “obsolete” and of little use in its current guise for addressing modern threats such as terrorism, but allied ‘cheap-riding’ was harming the United States itself. As Mr. Trump noted during the campaign, “[W]e are protecting them, giving them military protection and other things, and they’re ripping off the United States [. . .] Either they have to pay up for past deficiencies or they have to get out.”² Nor were these simply temporary musings aimed at shaking up a campaign. In fact, Mr. Trump’s complaints over allied cheap-riding were a regular theme during his campaign rallies, while charges that NATO was poorly structured to deal with modern international threats were a centerpiece of Trump’s foreign policy pitch.³ “NATO in my opinion is obsolete,” Mr. Trump vowed at an August 2016 rally in Wisconsin, “because it’s not covering terrorism. Obsolete for that reason and also you have many countries that aren’t paying their fair share.”⁴ Only if the alliance recast itself for modern military operations and reallocated defense burdens—so Trump’s logic went—could the alliance continue.

These broadsides against the transatlantic status quo were seemingly made all the more credible by Trump’s interest in improving U.S.-Russian ties. Whereas Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton vowed to take a hardline against Russia should she be elected, Trump waxed enthusiastic about possible American-Russian cooperation. “There’s nothing that I can think of that I’d rather do than have Russia friendly as opposed to the way they are right now so that we can go and knock out ISIS together,” Trump noted at a July 2016 news conference. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we actually got along with people, wouldn’t it be nice if we actually got along, as an example, with Russia?”⁵ Nor was the Republican candidate willing to hold Russian President

² Ashley Parker, “Trump Says NATO is ‘Obsolete,’ UN is ‘Political Game,’” *New York Times*, 2 April 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up/?_r=0.

³ Author’s analysis based on keyword search for “NATO” in Trump Presidential Campaign Documents, available online via UCSD Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123515&st=NATO&st1=>.

⁴ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay, Wisconsin,” 5 August 2016, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=123199>.

⁵ Donald J. Trump, “News Conference in Doral, Florida,” 27 July 2016, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=118047&st=Russia&st1=>.

Vladimir Putin's autocratic tendencies against him, remarking at the same July 2016 conference "I'm not going to tell Putin what to do. Why would I tell him what to do?"⁶

Since his inauguration, however, Trump's NATO policy evolved in subtle but meaningful ways. To be sure, certain rhetorical broadsides continued, becoming particularly pronounced on matters of defense spending. Even on the eve of his inauguration, for instance, Mr. Trump criticized the European members of NATO for not "paying what they're supposed to be paying."⁷ Likewise, he emphasized "the importance of all NATO allies sharing the monetary burdens of defense spending" in a February 2017 call with the Italian Prime Minister, returning to this theme in discussions with the Spanish Prime Minister, the German Chancellor, and NATO's own Secretary General.⁸ Moreover, other members of the Trump administration have worked to amplify Trump's critiques. Secretary of Defense James Mattis for one, bluntly warned his European counterparts that "if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to [NATO], each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defense" by upping defense spending.⁹ Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made similar points to the assembled NATO foreign ministers, asserting that "it is no longer sustainable for the U.S. to maintain a disproportionate share of NATO's defense expenditures."¹⁰ Not to be outdone, Vice President Michael Pence used his own visits to European capitals to press NATO allies for increased defense spending while calling on NATO—as he told German Chancellor Angela Merkel—to "transform itself to meet 21st century threats."¹¹

⁶ Jeremy Diamond, "Timeline: Donald Trump's Praise for Vladimir Putin," CNN, 29 July 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/28/politics/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-quotes/>.

⁷ Michael R. Gordon and Niraj Chokshi, "Trump Criticizes NATO and Hopes for 'Good Deals' with Putin," *New York Times*, 15 January 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/world/europe/donald-trump-nato.html>; James Masters and Katie Hunt, "Trump Rattles NATO with 'Obsolete' Blast," CNN, 17 January 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/16/politics/donald-trump-times-bild-interview-takeaways/index.html>.

⁸ Donald J. Trump, "Press Release—Readout of the President's Call with Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni of Italy," 4 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123138&st=&st1=>; Donald J. Trump, "Press Release - Readout of the President's Call with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of Spain," 7 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123155&st=&st1=>; The White House, "Joint Press Conference with President Trump and German Chancellor Merkel," 17 March 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/17/joint-press-conference-president-trump-and-german-chancellor-merkel>; Donald J. Trump, "Press Release—Readout of the President's Call with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg," 5 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123133&st=&st1=>.

⁹ Quoted in David M. Herszenhorn, "James Mattis Gives NATO Spending Ultimatum," *Politico*, 17 February 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/article/james-mattis-gives-nato-spending-ultimatum/>.

¹⁰ Michael Birnbaum "Tillerson Clashes with NATO Allies on Defense Spending at Brussels Meeting," *Washington Post*, 31 March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/tillerson-clashes-with-nato-allies-on-defense-spending-during-brief-meeting/2017/03/31/0d34906c-1618-11e7-924b-58851f3a675d_story.html.

¹¹ Donald J. Trump, "Press Release - Readout of the Vice President's Meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel," 18 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*,

That said, Trump and key officials have also softened the edges of their criticism by laying down markers seemingly intended to signal that U.S. support for NATO is far from a dead letter. On one level, the new administration continued late Obama-era efforts to increase the U.S. troop presence in Europe, allowing deployments to NATO's East European members and joint exercises to continue as part of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI).¹² As importantly, Trump's proposed defense budget promises a 40 percent increase (\$3.4 billion to \$4.8 billion) in ERI funding to abet further troop deployments, additional pre-positioned equipment, and joint training along NATO's Eastern flank, and to strengthen U.S. military assets—including combat aircraft—in other NATO states.¹³ Nor does this effort simply involve funding changes: in a further sign of Trump's NATO evolution, June 2017 saw American forces take the lead in the first-ever NATO drill designed to defend the Suwalki Gap – connecting the Baltic members of NATO with the rest of the alliance—from attack.¹⁴ And, amidst concerns that Russia's *Zapad 2017* war game might be a pretext for an attack on the Baltics, the administration authorized the deployment of additional American combat aircraft and personnel to the region to signal American resolve.¹⁵

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123373&st=&st1=>; also Donald J. Trump, "Press Release - Readout of the Vice President's Meeting with Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel," 19 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123382&st=&st1=>; Donald J. Trump, "Press Release—Readout of the Vice President's Meeting with German Vice Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel," 2 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123139&st=&st1=>.

¹² 4th Infantry Division Command Element, "U.S. Army Europe's Division-Level Headquarters Deploys to Poland for Operation Atlantic Resolve," 4 May 2017, <https://www.army.mil/article/187244/>; Travis J. Tritten, "House Looks at Increasing Permanent Military Presence in Europe," *Washington Examiner*, 22 May 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/house-looks-at-increasing-permanent-military-presence-in-europe/article/2623819>; Rebecca Kheel, "Armed Services Chair Weighs Permanent Troop Presence in Eastern Europe," *The Hill*, 22 May 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/334604-armed-services-chair-weighs-permanent-troops-presence-in-eastern-europe>.

¹³ Cheryl Pellerin, "2018 Budget Request for European Reassurance Initiative Grows to \$4.7 Billion," *DOD News*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1199828/2018-budget-request-for-european-reassurance-initiative-grows-to-47-billion/>; Sandra Erwin and Colin Clark, "Trump's 2018 DOD Budget Stressed RDTE, Rebuilding," *Breaking Defense*, 23 May 2017, <http://breakingdefense.com/2017/05/trumps-2018-budget-puts-dod-in-rebuilding-mode/>. According to the Air Force, increased ERI funds "ensures the retention of F-15C aircraft in the 493rd Fighter Squadron at RAF Lakenheath as well as support squadron operations and weapon systems to maintain combat readiness," as well as funding U.S. intelligence-gathering assets in Europe; see John Vandiver, "Air Force in Europe Gets Big Boost Under Budget Plan," *Stars and Stripes*, 4 June 2017, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/06/04/air-force-europe-gets-big-boost-budget-plan.html>.

¹⁴ "NATO Chief Warns Russia with Message of 'Deterrence' after Suwalki Gap Drills," *Intelligencer Post*, 21 June 2017, <http://www.intelligencerpost.com/nato-chief-warns-russia-message-deterrence-suwalki-gap-drills/>; Andrius Sytas, "NATO War Game Defends Baltic Weak Spot for First Time," *Reuters*, 18 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-suwalki-gap-idUSKBN1990L2>.

¹⁵ Richard Sisk, "US Builds Up European Forces Ahead of Russian War Games," *DOD Buzz*, 7 August 2017, <https://www.dodbuzz.com/2017/08/07/us-builds-european-forces-ahead-russian-war-games/>. See also Andrea Shalal,

Unsurprisingly, these steps have been greeted enthusiastically by other NATO leaders. No less an official than NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted after the budget was announced that “after many years of a decline in U.S. military presence in Europe we now see for the first time in many years an increase. So this is a commitment to our collective defense from the United States not only in words but also in deeds.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, Polish president Andrzej Duda lauded the growing U.S. troop presence in his country—part of the ERI – as a “historic moment” that reinforced Polish security.¹⁷ Not to be outdone, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė praised the June 2017 NATO exercises for sending a “strong message of NATO readiness and commitment to ensure security of the region”—a point also made by Stoltenberg.¹⁸ In short, not only has the United States under Trump continued investing heavily in the hard capabilities undergirding the United States’ commitment to the alliance, but allied states themselves seem to be hearing the message.

Second, Trump has taken a harder line on Russia since the election. Already in mid-April 2017, Trump declared U.S.-Russian relations at “an all-time low,” with an unnamed senior administration official elaborating that problems with Russia “reinforced” the U.S. commitment to NATO.¹⁹ By his July 2017 visit to Warsaw, this view had further hardened.²⁰ Speaking nearly twenty eight years to the day after President George H.W. Bush visited the city amid the 1989 Revolutions, Trump expressly called on Russia to “cease its destabilizing activities” in Ukraine and beyond, before taking a thinly-veiled swipe at Moscow by calling on “Americans, Poles, and the nations of Europe” to “confront forces, whether they come from inside or out,

“US General Says Allies Worry Russian War Game May be ‘Trojan Horse,’” *Reuters*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-usa-idUSKBN1A52WO>.

¹⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, “NATO Cheers Trump Military Budget,” *Politico*, 24 May 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/article/nato-donald-trump-military-spending-cheers-military-budget-jens-stoltenberg/>.

¹⁷ Darko Janjevic, “Poland Welcomes ‘Historic’ NATO Deployment Near Kaliningrad,” *DW.com*, 14 April 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/poland-welcomes-historic-nato-deployment-near-kaliningrad/a-38424403>; Tom O’Connor, “US Soldiers Deployed to Poland’s Border with Russia as Trump Changes NATO Views,” *Newsweek*, 14 April 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-soldiers-poland-border-russia-trump-nato-584256>.

¹⁸ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “NATO Holds Military Maneuvers in Poland, Near Lithuanian Border,” 19 June 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-military-maneuvers-poland-lithuania-belarus-latvia-suwalki-gap/28564768.html>.

¹⁹ Donald J. Trump, ““The President’s News Conference With Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” 12 April 2017,” online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123739&st=&st1=>; Donald J. Trump, “Background Briefing on the Visit of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg,” 12 April 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123856&st=&st1=>.

²⁰ For earlier concerns, see Alex Lockie, “Trump Unequivocally Pledges to Protect NATO From Russia – But Still Wants Unprecedented Backpay,” *Business Insider*, 9 June 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-nato-article-5-support-2017-6>.

from the South or the East.”²¹ A few weeks later, Trump signed a bill authorizing sanctions on Russia by noting “that we will side with our allies and friends against Russian subversion and destabilization.”²² To be sure, Trump still has not taken a *hard* line against Russia, with the American leader voicing doubts that Russia meddled in U.S. domestic politics and enjoying what often appears to be a cozy personal relationship with Putin.²³ Nevertheless, the overall trend is far removed from Trump’s prior calls for a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that—had it occurred—might have undermined the U.S. commitment to NATO.

Above all, and despite the overt criticism of allied cheap-riding, the administration also backed away from direct attacks on the utility of NATO itself. Indeed, after again calling the alliance “obsolete” on the eve of his inauguration, Trump himself has stopped such comments, even reversing course to argue “I said [NATO] was obsolete. It’s no longer obsolete” in April 2017.²⁴ Concurrently, Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Mattis have made the affirmation of transatlantic unity a centerpiece of their own foreign policy remarks, and there is no indication that Trump has sought to muzzle their comments.²⁵ In addition, and echoing suggestive language to this effect offered in the 2016 campaign, the administration seems to be quietly laying down markers as to how it would like NATO to evolve in the future. Vice President Pence’s February meetings with European leaders, for instance, “underscored that NATO must adapt to confront threats to our countries such as violent extremism and terrorism,”²⁶ a theme reiterated in Secretary of State

²¹ The White House, “Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland,” 6 July 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/06/remarks-president-trump-people-poland-july-6-2017>.

²² The White House, “Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Signing the ‘Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,” 2 August 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/02/statement-president-donald-j-trump-signing-countering-americas>.

²³ Laura King, “Trump Still Harbors Doubts about Russian Hacking, New White House Communications Director Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-trump-still-harbors-doubts-about-1500825343-htmlstory.html>; Eli Watkins and Jeremy Diamond, “Trump, Putin Met for Nearly an Hour in Second G20 Meeting,” CNN, 19 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/18/politics/trump-putin-g20/index.html>; Oleg Matsnev, “Trump is ‘Not My Bride,’ Putin Says,” *New York Times*, 5 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/world/europe/vladimir-putin-donald-trump.html?mcubz=0&r=0>.

²⁴ Steve Holland, “Trump Says NATO Not Obsolete, Reversing Campaign Stances,” *Reuters*, 12 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nato-idUSKBN17E2OK>.

²⁵ See, e.g., Jim Garamone, “Mattis Salutes NATO Collective Security During Marshall Center Speech,” DoD News, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1231488/mattis-salutes-nato-collective-security-during-marshall-center-speech/>; U.S. Department of State, “Rex W. Tillerson, NATO Foreign Ministerial intervention Remarks,” 31 March 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269339.htm>; Gardiner Harris, “Jim Mattis, in Lithuania, Reaffirms U.S. Commitment to NATO,” *New York Times*, 10 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/world/europe/jim-mattis-nato-us-lithuania.html?mcubz=0>.

²⁶ Indeed, NATO transformation was discussed on two separate occasions; see Donald J. Trump, “Press Release - Readout of the Vice President’s Meeting with German Vice Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel,” 2 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123139&st=&st1=>; Donald J. Trump, “Press Release - Readout of the Vice President’s Meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel,” 18 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and

Tillerson's comments to NATO foreign ministers in late March.²⁷ And, in arguably the most forthright statement of American resolve yet, Pence used a late July 2017 visit to Estonia to vow that the United States stands "with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security" in the face of prospective Russian threats.²⁸ Meanwhile, one of Trump's first acts as President—and one of Michael Flynn's only acts as National Security Advisor before resigning—was to approve Montenegro's admission into the alliance; this is hardly a move consistent with a dying alliance.

Of course, Trump famously declined to affirm the United States' fidelity to NATO's Article V—pledging to render all assistance "deemed necessary" to America's allies in the event of an attack—at the May 2017 NATO summit, and instead harangued the allies on defense spending.²⁹ He seems to have done so, moreover, despite the advice of Tillerson, Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster.³⁰ Still, even this high-profile move—decried in U.S. foreign policy circles, especially when Merkel thereafter claimed that the American commitment to Europe was unreliable—seems the exception rather than the rule.³¹ After all, Trump had already repeatedly affirmed the United States' commitment to and support for NATO after taking office,³² while pledges of transatlantic loyalty are such a regular feature of comments by Mattis, Pence,

John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*,

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123373&st=&st1=>; also Donald J. Trump, "Press Release—Readout of the Vice President's Meeting with Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel," 19 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123382&st=&st1=>.

²⁷ Birnbaum, "Tillerson Clashes."

²⁸ The White House, "Remarks by the Vice President to Enhanced Forward Presence and Estonian Troops," 31 July 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/31/remarks-vice-president-enhanced-forward-presence-and-estonian-troops>.

²⁹ Eliot Cohen, "What Did Trump Accomplish on His First Foreign Trip?" *The Atlantic*, 28 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/did-trumps-first-trip-abroad-accomplish-anything/528042/>.

³⁰ Susan B. Glasser, "Trump National Security Team Blindsided by NATO Speech," *Politico Magazine*, 5 June 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/05/trump-nato-speech-national-security-team-215227>.

³¹ For a review of these critiques, see Benjamin Friedman and Joshua Shiffrin, "Trump, NATO, and Establishment Hysteria," *War on the Rocks*, 16 June 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/trump-nato-and-establishment-hysteria>.

³² "News Conference with Stoltenberg," 12 April 2017; "Readout of the President's Call with Stoltenberg," 5 February 2017; Donald J. Trump, "Press Release—Readout of the President's Call with Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni of Italy," 4 February 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123138&st=NATO&st1=commitment>; Donald J. Trump, "The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni of Italy," 20 April 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123782&st=NATO&st1=commitment>; Donald J. Trump, "Joint Statement by President Trump and Prime Minister Justin P.J. Trudeau of Canada," 13 February 2017, online by

and Tillerson that these officials are portrayed as Trump's de facto fire brigade.³³ Putting the point succinctly, Trump used his July visit to Warsaw to vow that "we stand firmly behind Article V, the mutual defense commitment."³⁴ Trump's United States, in other words, remains wedded to NATO. While nothing stops Trump from resuming his attacks on the alliance in the future, Trump's rhetoric—for now—remains largely wedded to transatlantic verities.

A Trumpian NATO Policy

Taken as a whole, then, what can we say of Trump's NATO policy through late 2017? The above analysis suggests a mix of the old and new so far as U.S. relations with NATO are concerned.

In keeping with prior U.S. policy, Trump has come around to signal the American commitment to transatlantic unity: not only have a veritable parade of U.S. leaders gone to Europe to underscore the American commitment to NATO, but the new administration has in several ways accelerated investment in the hard-power tools that are the clearest indicator of this commitment. In this latter effort, the administration would not only like to see NATO take on new military missions, but for the other NATO member states to increase their own contributions to the common defense and to reduce the burdens upon the United States. Made in uniquely blustery form, these calls are not substantively new. After all, limiting the American commitment to NATO has a long pedigree going back to the formation of the alliance.³⁵ Meanwhile, American policymakers since the Cold War have pressured the European allies to spend more on defense. Indeed, the Department of Defense formerly published annual reports on allied defense contributions to hold the allies accountable to their military commitments, while transatlantic dustups in the Truman, Nixon, Reagan, and Obama administrations saw prominent U.S. officials lambast laggard allied defense contributions; most recently, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued that there was "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

Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*,
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123206&st=NATO&st1=commitment>.

³³ See, inter alia, Idrees Ali, "Pentagon's Mattis Again Seeks to Reassure U.S. Allies," *Reuters*, 19 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mattis-trump/pentagons-mattis-again-seeks-to-reassure-u-s-allies-idUSKCNIAZ0D0>; Julian Borger, "Mattis, Tillerson, and Kelly 'Press On' Under Trump—but for How Long?" *The Guardian*, 2 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/02/rex-tillerson-james-mattis-john-kelly-donald-trump>; Glasser, "Trump National Security Team."

³⁴ Dan Mercia, Kevin Liptak, and Jeff Zelnj "Trump, Showered in Polish Praise, Backs NATO's Article 5," CNN, 6 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/06/politics/trump-speech-poland/>.

³⁵ For steps to minimize the demands on the United States, see Timothy Ireland, *Creating the Entangling Alliance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981); Mark S. Sheetz, "Exit Strategies: American Grand Designs for Postwar European Security," *Security Studies* 8:4 (1999), 1-43; Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), Robert Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Alexander Mattelaer, "Revisiting the Principles of NATO Burden-Sharing," *Parameters* 46:1 (Spring 2016), 25-33.

resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.”³⁶ Trump, in other words, has both kept the core of the American commitment to NATO intact, while even his criticism of the NATO allies on shopworn issues.

Instead, Trump’s main change has been to break with the received wisdom on how to manage intra-alliance relations. Whether due to strategic calculation or simply learned behavior, prior American administrations were reluctant to call into question the value of the transatlantic alliance irrespective of whether the allies spent significantly on defense or cooperated against common opponents.³⁷ Instead, such dilemmas were addressed within a mindset that assumed NATO was *ex ante* valuable, with the problems simply those of making a multilateral arrangement among disparate states work. Hence, while transatlantic disagreements often occurred, the starting premise seems to have been that such disagreements should not upset NATO itself—debate over defense spending and strategy were secondary to assurances that the alliance would survive.³⁸

Trump, however, has split with this past approach to alliance management. After all, not only has the U.S. leader raised the question of whether the costs of the alliance are worth the benefits to the United States, but—more importantly—he has shown himself willing to rebuke partners that do not accede to American demands. This has at times gone so far as to suggest that Trump is willing to hold allied relations hostage if American demands are not met, suggesting that Trump sees the threat of American exit—even as a bluff—as offering bargaining leverage in intra-alliance negotiations. Baldly stated, Trump has adopted a hard-ball approach to alliance management, one that breaks with prior practice in underscoring—not sidestepping—the fact that the United States might one day decide the transatlantic alliance game is no longer worth the quid. Chest-thumping, browbeating, and overt references to balance of power calculations have replaced

³⁶ On allied defense spending reports, see Department of Defense, “Allied Contributions to the Common Defense,” <http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/allied.aspx>. In addition to the sources cited above, see Karen DeYoung, “NATO Fears U.S. Cost Cutting,” *Washington Post*, 25 April 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/04/25/nato-fears-us-cost-cutting/b0a4c303-09f8-43a5-9f49-b52da7f54f49/>; <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/why-cant-our-allies-defend-themselves-19880616>; Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> for problems in the Reagan and Obama years. For Gates’ remarks, see Robert M. Gates, “Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defense Agenda, Brussels, Belgium,” 10 June 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4839>.

³⁷ Indeed, Secretary of Defense Gates’ 2011 speech heavily focused on the danger that allied free-riding would push American policymakers into questioning NATO’s intrinsic value.

³⁸ Making a similar observation are James Goldgeier and Ivo Daalder, who note that one of NATO’s principle advantages comes from a decision-making process “that allows for the emergence of consensus without agreement: rather than blocking a decision, dissenting member states may append a footnote to it or abstain from contributing to whatever operation may ensue.” In other words, intra-alliance free-riding is not only accepted but embraced as a tool for the alliance’s continuation; see Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “Global NATO,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:5 (September/October 2006), 111. Along similar lines, see comments by former Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute, who praised Trump’s call for greater allied defense spending while criticizing the administration’s nominally lackluster efforts to underscore the American commitment to NATO; Audrie Cornish, “Former U.S. Ambassador Responds to Trump’s Rhetoric on NATO,” NPR, 25 May 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/05/25/530074656/former-u-s-ambassador-responds-to-trumps-rhetoric-on-nato>.

suasion and conciliation as the diplomatic approach *de jure*. This rhetorical and stylistic change—more than any particular policy—is the true hallmark of Trump’s NATO policy.

In sum, Trump’s NATO policy is brutalist. NATO is ultimately to remain intact. The American commitment will continue. Military exercises will roll onward. When, however, the United States feels it is in its interest, Trump seems to have no problem reminding the allies that the relationship is not sacrosanct and bringing political pressure to bear on the issues at hand. Because no alliance commitment is wholly credible, the result causes a dilemma for the allies each time the matter comes up: concerned with what European security affairs would look like without the United States, allied heads of state are pushed to either accede to American demands or risk Trump’s further ire.

Trump and Alliance Politics: Competing Models

This pattern of behavior begs the question: to what extent is Trump’s approach to NATO likely to alter—for good or ill—the United States’ relationship with the European allies and, in doing so, reshape European security affairs? In many ways, this is the heart of the debate surrounding Trump and NATO. Nevertheless, discussion of the issue has thus far been conducted in a vacuum, disassociated with explicit discussion of how alliances operate and what it takes for one member of an alliance to influence the behavior of its partners.

Analysts are rarely explicit about the matter, but two separate models of alliance politics seem to be present in existing debates. These models are distinct from prominent debates over whether powerful states can use alliances to create international order or merely to aggregate capabilities.³⁹ Rather, they reflect different views of the steps and sacrifices states must embrace in order to make alliances function in support of a particular objective. Depending on which model applies, Trump’s NATO policy is either likely to court disaster by unravelling the foundations of transatlantic partnership, or to have a more conditional—though not good—effect on alliance relations.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, believers in what I refer to as “Rising Tide” alliances believe that alliance relations cannot operate in the shadow of intra-alliance competition. Although states which are party to an alliance may still have reasons to compete and manipulate one another, the durability of an alliance hinges on its members acting as if such competitive pressures were secondary—suppressing, in other words, competition for the collective good.⁴⁰ Hence, when states disagree over alliance policy or face other bilateral disputes,

³⁹ For archetypes of these respective arguments, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ For discussion along similar lines, see Randall Schweller, “The Concept of Alliance,” in Yoichi Funabashi, ed., *Alliance Tomorrow: Security Arrangements After the Cold War* (Tokyo: The Tokyo Foundation, 2001), 240-241.

diplomacy, suasion, and conciliation are the recommended steps to resolving the disputes and influencing one's partners.⁴¹ Rhetoric and diplomatic style thus matter a great deal.⁴²

In the process, and even if one ally sacrifices its interests to its partners at one point in time, such concessions are likely to be reciprocated by other allies in the future so to keep all members of an alliance satisfied with the basic arrangement.⁴³ Put differently, just as a rising tide lifts all boats, so too does this type of alliance relationship assume that one state's concession of an issue of interest for the sake of alliance solidarity will catalyze similar concessions by its partners at a future date; thus, just as the United States has regularly spent more than its allies on defense, so too has it extracted promises—often unfulfilled—that its partners will eventually increase their own defense spending. In theory, the net result is a virtuous cycle of alliance relations: provided states speak kindly to one another and refrain from hard-bargaining on matters of narrow self-interest, they can encourage good will and catalyze reciprocity among partners to help the alliance survive and thrive. If not, alliances are likely to be fragile enterprises, prone to collapse if states embrace hard-bargaining for narrow self-interest and less-than-conciliatory rhetoric.⁴⁴

This type of alliance logic seems to drive analyses concluding that the Trump administration is undercutting NATO. In this telling, Trump's attacks on allied defense spending, reticence to embrace Article V, and willingness to signal an interest in working with Russia constitute a major break in transatlantic relations.⁴⁵ Trump's pointed criticisms of allied cheap-riding and willingness to link these to U.S. security guarantees

⁴¹ Indeed, this logic is implicit to arguments that alliances provide states "voice opportunities" to influence their partners' behavior. Clearly, not only does the style in which such opportunities are exploited matter, but a state believing its partners (especially stronger partners) are employing an inhospitable bargaining stance are likely to defect from an arrangement; for formulation of the voice opportunities thesis, see Joseph M. Grieco, "The Maastricht Treaty, Economic and Monetary Union, and the Neorealist Research Program," *Review of International Studies* 21:1 (January 1995): 21-40.

⁴² For related work on rhetoric and diplomatic style as it affects adversary relations, see Robert Trager, "Long-Term Consequences of Aggressive Diplomacy: European Relations after Austrian Crimean War Threats," *Security Studies* 21:2 (April 2012): 232-265.

⁴³ This same logic is central to discussions of tit-for-tat strategies in iterated prisoner dilemma games. For discussion of such models and some application to NATO, see Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *World Politics* 38:1 (October 1985): 226-254.

⁴⁴ Likewise, Stephen Walt notes that anything that casts doubt on the credibility of one's alliance commitment tends to undercut an alliance; rhetoric might be one such factor. See Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39:1 (Spring 1997), 160-161.

⁴⁵ As Henry Farrell concludes, growing German concern with the American commitment to NATO—and Germany's efforts to hedge its security bets—"is a direct result of Trump's words and actions," including Trump's occasional ambivalence on Article 5 and attacks on allied free-riding; Henry Farrell, "Thanks to Trump, Germany says it can't rely on the United States. What does that mean?" *The Washington Post Monkey Cage*, 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/>. See also Robbie Gramer, "Trump Discovers Article 5 after Disastrous NATO Visit," *Foreign Policy*, 9 June 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/trump-discovers-article-5-after-disastrous-nato-visit-brussels-visit-transatlantic-relationship-europe/>.

have been a particular source of alarm: such overt attempts to extract material concessions from the United States' transatlantic partners have notionally transformed NATO from a security community to a purely transactional alliance.⁴⁶ Since, however, Trump has not actually moved away from the hard power assets undergirding the alliance—and, in fact, has come around on matters such as Article V—concerns with Trump's rhetoric only makes sense if one believes alliances cannot stand the strain of an American leader willing to carve out unabashedly self-interested positions.⁴⁷ By implication, the more Trump continues speaking out against allies—even if the alliance continues to function well at the military level—the more likely he is to undercut allied faith in the United States and encourage allies to abandon the transatlantic relationship.⁴⁸

In contrast, a second type of alliance dynamic implies that the consequences of Trump's policy are less easily predicted. Instead of emphasizing rhetoric and mutual concessions as the coin of the realm for alliance durability, alliances might instead be seen as Competitive Security arrangements. In this view, states that are party to an alliance agree to cooperate against a common threat or in support of a common agenda, but this does not necessarily subsume the other reasons states have to compete with one another – after all, an alliance may end and former allies may become outright competitors.⁴⁹ Hence, intra-alliance cooperation is married

⁴⁶ For Trump's transactional approach and criticism thereof, see James Kirchik, "Why Donald Trump Keeps Dissing America's Allies in Europe and Asia," *The Daily Beast*, 29 December 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/why-donald-trump-keeps-dissing-americas-allies-in-europe-and-asia>. Strikingly, and again suggesting the emphasis some analysts place on rhetoric, this critique of Trump's NATO policy began even before he took office.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Julie Smith, "Trump's Article 5 Omission Was an Attack Against All of NATO," *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/26/trumps-article-5-omission-was-an-attack-against-all-of-nato/>; Alfred W. McCoy, "Trump's Foreign Policy Meltdown," *The Nation*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/trumps-foreign-policy-meltdown/>; also Susan B. Glasser, "The 27 Words Trump Wouldn't Say," *Politico Magazine*, 6 June 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/06/trump-nato-speech-27-words-commitment-215231>

⁴⁸ For analysis along these lines, see Kelly M. McFarland, "As Trump leaves for Europe, a question looms: Will he really commit to NATO once and for all?" *Washington Post Monkey Cage*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/06/will-trump-commit-to-natos-article-5-once-and-for-all-for-europe-its-a-big-question/>. As McFarland writes, what NATO members want "is a firm statement on Article 5 of the NATO treaty—which simply stipulates that an attack on one alliance nation is an attack on them all. This is the core of the NATO alliance, and U.S. adherence to Article 5 dominates alliance members' calculations, especially in Eastern Europe. Although Trump pledged U.S. adherence to Article 5 during a June news conference with the Romanian president, many in the alliance remain uncertain, given the president's failure to make a public commitment during his speech to fellow NATO leaders in May." Clearly, this argument works only if one assumes that alliances need constant benign diplomatic engagement to succeed.

⁴⁹ For emphasis on the often-competitive nature of states within an alliance, see Schweller, "Concept of Alliance," 236-238. On intra-alliance disputes, the foundational statement remains Glenn Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36:1 (July 1984): 461-495.

with states' perennial interest in seeking relative gains and advantages over one another, and alliance management is inherently riven with coercion and pressure among partners.⁵⁰

Much therefore depends on what states in an alliance do: because words are cheap, the durability of an alliance and its success depends on the military and security decisions allies adopt vis-à-vis one another on a rolling basis. There needs to be some minimal level of investment in the capabilities and political arrangements to ensure the alliance functions. Beyond this baseline, however, states can and do engage in a host of behaviors—such as underproviding for collective defense, creating facts on the ground to entangle their partners, and bringing political pressure to bear on allied leaders—to compete with their partners within a generally cooperative framework.⁵¹ Prior slights and diplomatic criticism thus tend to become irrelevant; far more central is what states do with the hard tools at their disposal.

Approached from this perspective, Trump's NATO policy is likely to have more ambiguous consequences. On one level, Trump's rhetorical slights against NATO members are unlikely to matter much provided the United States continues working within the NATO framework. Indeed, by more directly taking allies to task for underinvesting in their militaries, Trump may even—as Michael Mandelbaum argues—incentivize allied heads of state to make the politically difficult decision to trade butter for guns.⁵² By the same token, however, Trump's approach also creates a situation where events could spin out of control. After all, Trump's pre-election inclination seems to have been to distance the United States from NATO, and it remains unclear whether the steps taken thus far to sustain the American commitment to transatlantic relations will continue.⁵³ This would be especially true if figures such as Mattis and McMaster—two of the strongest proponents of NATO inside the administration—depart. Under such conditions, one would have to worry about Trump's NATO bashing reappearing in conjunction with steps that actually weaken the United States' hard-power investment in NATO; ironically, this might even occur in an environment where Trump himself expected reduced U.S. investments to catalyze allied concessions to U.S. demands (much as reduced defense spending in the 1960s and 1970s spurred increased European defense contributions to NATO). Although it is possible that such pressure on NATO might succeed, the gambit might also fail.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ On American coercion of its allies, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Frenemies: Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Nonproliferation in U.S. Foreign Policy," unpublished book manuscript, Tufts University, 2017.

⁵¹ Along similar lines, see John Schuessler and Joshua Shiffrin, "The Shadow of Exit: Insularity and American Preponderance," unpublished working paper, 2017. Similarly, Walt's discussion of alliance durability notes that declining allied capabilities may be a particularly powerful driver of alliance collapse; Walt, "Why Alliances Endure," 160. See, too, Mark Sheetz's analysis of the various efforts by the United States to push NATO allies towards providing for their own defense in the early Cold War; Sheetz, "Exit Strategies."

⁵² Michael Mandelbaum, "Pay Up Europe: What Trump Gets Right about NATO," *Foreign Affairs* 96:5 (September/October 2017), 108-112.

⁵³ For Trump's initial impetus and its relationship to NATO, see Randall Schweller, "A Third Image Explanation for Why Trump Now," *ISSF Policy Series: America and the World*, 8 February 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5m-third-image>.

⁵⁴ On these issues, see Friedman and Shiffrin, "Establishment Hysteria."

Conclusion

Like the rest of his foreign policy agenda, Trump's NATO policy is a hodgepodge of the familiar and the new. Backing away from his earlier assaults on NATO's value in itself, his criticism of allied free-riding—to say nothing of crude language—remains. Allied discomfort with the result is obvious. By the same token, however, Trump has also engaged in substantive steps fully in keeping with the United States' commitment to NATO, and whether this combination of substantive consistency and stylistic change is sustainable remains to be determined. Ultimately, just as analysts themselves are divided over what it takes to sustain an alliance, so is the Trump administration's approach to NATO an exercise in testing the resiliency of the transatlantic relationship.

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