

H-Diplo | ISSF

POLICY Series

America and the World—2017 and Beyond

Sound and Fury, Signifying Something? NATO and the Trump Administration's Second Year

Essay by **Joshua Shiffrin**, Boston University

Published on **15 July 2018** | issforum.org

Editor: Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

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

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

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

As the Trump administration's second year in office rolls onward, what is the state of the transatlantic alliance? Writing for H-Diplo last year, I argued that Trump's first year in office saw the emergence of a "Trumpian NATO policy."¹ In brief, this policy encompassed significant continuity with the substance of prior U.S. policy towards NATO, coupled with highly conditional U.S. rhetorical backing for the transatlantic relationship. As Trump—in a break from his campaign rhetoric—emphasized through mid-2017, NATO provided value to the United States, even as he suggested the United States might exit the alliance should its allies not agree to U.S. demands in intra-alliance discussions.

One year on, the fundamentals of this policy have not changed. The substance of U.S. policy towards NATO is strikingly similar to that of prior administrations, whereas the rhetoric remains a stark departure from past practice. Moreover, the bifurcated European response to Trump's policy—praising the substance and decrying the rhetoric—has, if anything, grown clearer. Instead, the big shift has come in how many analysts themselves assess the long-term impact of Trump's strategy. If 2017 saw analysts worried that Trump would rock the foundations of the "liberal international order"—with NATO at its core—then 2018 has seen scholars and policymakers alike increasingly debating whether the liberal order can recover at all from Trump's assault. This situation, in turn, raises questions over the factors—rhetorical, substantive, or some combination—that have allowed NATO to survive and thrive over the last seventy years, and whether there is sufficient give in the transatlantic relationship to endure a potentially rocky road for the indefinite future.

Trump and NATO at Dawn's Early Light: A Reprise

The transatlantic alliance survived a raucous start to 2017 as Donald J. Trump assumed the U.S. presidency. The problems were obvious. Trump arrived in office more overtly critical of transatlantic cooperation than

¹ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Trump and NATO: Old Wine in Gold Bottles?" *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series: America and The World-2017 and Beyond*, 29 September 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5ba-nato>.

any president in the postwar era, at one point lambasting NATO as an “obsolete” alliance.² Accusations that NATO was exploiting the United States financially by free-riding on the United States’s security largesse became commonplace rather than—as in prior administrations—the exception. Coupled with troubling U.S. diplomatic outreach to Russia and other autocracies, these dynamics created understandable concern in European capitals. Not only was Trump suggesting that the U.S. might unilaterally arrogate or substantially change the transatlantic relationship but, given Europe’s reliance on U.S. security guarantees in the short-run, such changes threatened to create a window of vulnerability at a time of renewed Russian aggression. Thus, when Trump infamously failed to proclaim the United States’s fidelity to the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5 at last year’s NATO Summit, analysts were quick to flag the lapse as an encapsulation of what the Trump administration was changing in transatlantic relations.

At the same time, there were also important elements of continuity with prior U.S. policy, alongside some glimmers of hope. First, shortly after arriving in office, the administration’s rhetoric subtly shifted: instead being labelled “obsolete,” NATO was instead praised for its useful role in combating terrorism and its potential for future transformation to meet modern conditions. Second, while Trump dodged mention of Article 5 at the Warsaw Summit, this was the exception rather than the rule. In fact, through the fall of last year, the Trump administration regularly affirmed its commitment to NATO’s security guarantees through bilateral meetings with the allies and visits by senior officials such as Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Meanwhile, the substance of U.S. engagement with NATO remained strong. In fact, the Trump administration accelerated funding requests for the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI; formerly the European Reassurance Initiative) begun under the Obama administration. Military exercises continued as well, with NATO itself reporting that the alliance “conducted 108 exercises” while “Allies held 162 national and multinational exercises;”³ this is on par with the pre-Trump rate.⁴ Above all, NATO expansion—a prominent theme in the United States’s post-Cold War engagement—continued with Montenegro’s February 2017 admission into the alliance.

The combined result was a Trumpian NATO policy that married substantive continuity with prior U.S. policy to sharp changes in how the alliance was managed. Trump proved willing—even keen—to publicly threaten allies in order to extract concessions on a range of policy issues. Of course, prior administrations used this kind of rhetoric as well, but generally only deployed threats on matters of significant strategic significance after other avenues for alliance negotiation had been exhausted, and even then kept these conversations confined to quiet diplomatic channels; in public, NATO was treated as *ex ante* valuable. A departure in the

² Donald J. Trump, “Remarks at the KI Convention Center in Green Bay, Wisconsin,” 5 August 2016, at Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *UCSB American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=123199>.

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereafter NATO), “Key NATO and Allied Exercises in 2018,” Fact Sheet, June 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_04/20180425_1804-factsheet_exercises_en.pdf.

⁴ NATO, “Key NATO and Allied Exercises,” Fact Sheet, October 2015, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_10/20151007_1510-factsheet_exercises_en.pdf; NATO, “Key NATO and Allied Exercises,” Fact Sheet, July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160704_1607-factsheet_exercises_en.pdf.

United States's alliance management style—not the core of American policy itself—was the Trump administration's major accomplishment through its first year.

Trump and NATO: First Blood, Part 2

The Trump administration's second year has continued the trend of mixing reassuring and coercive signals vis-à-vis NATO, while consolidating the effort to exploitatively wring concessions from the United States's European partners. This dynamic has prompted newfound European and Canadian efforts at managing an increasingly capricious United States. The long-term repercussions of this effort remain unclear.

On the reassuring side of the ledger, the second half of 2017 and first part of 2018 saw the United States seemingly double down on its current commitment to NATO's collective defense. To this end, Trump's first National Security Strategy (released in December 2017) declared, "The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty."⁵ The subsequent National Defense Strategy reaffirmed this message, arguing that the United States would strive to "fortify the trans-Atlantic NATO alliance" and vowing that "A strong and free Europe, bound by shared principles of democracy, national sovereignty, and commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is vital to our security."⁶ And, in stark contrast to Trump's ambivalent position at the 2017 Warsaw Summit, the United States signed on to the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration holding that "NATO remains the foundation for strong collective defense and the essential transatlantic forum for security consultations and decisions."⁷

Trump administration officials have returned to these themes in their individual remarks. Mattis, for one, underlined in February 2018 that "the U.S. remains fully committed to NATO, our union of democratic nations, united in our efforts to protect our populations and our way of life."⁸ National Security Advisor John Bolton—who replaced McMaster in April—echoed this theme in late June 2018, stating "The president wants a strong NATO;" Pence offered similarly reassuring language on the U.S. commitment to Europe when visiting the Balkans last year.⁹ And, continuing his 2017 outreach, Trump himself affirmed the U.S.

⁵ Donald J. Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, 48, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁶ James Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," January 2018, 9, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁷ NATO, "Brussels Summit Declaration," 11 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm.

⁸ "Press Conference by Secretary of Defense Mattis at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium," 15 February 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1443704/press-conference-by-secretary-mattis-at-nato-headquarters-in-brussels-belgium/>.

⁹ David Boddiger, "What Country Does John Bolton Work For Anyway?" *Splinter News*, 1 July 2018, <https://splinternews.com/what-country-does-john-bolton-work-for-anyway-1827272175>; Sewell Chan, "Mike Pence in

commitment to NATO, telling Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte that “the NATO alliance remains the cornerstone” of “common security” and vowing to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that the U.S. “reaffirms our commitment to Article 5 and the mutual defense pact.”¹⁰

The substance of U.S. policy has also continued to fall largely in line with prior administrations and that of Trump’s first year. U.S. direct funding for NATO and common equipment procurement, for instance, amounted to \$6.87 billion in 2018 and \$6.96 billion in 2017, against \$7.1 billion in the last year of the Obama administration.¹¹ The EDI is also going strong, seeing its budget grow from a requested \$3.4 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017—the Obama administration’s last budget—to \$6.5 billion in FY 2019.¹² Similarly, NATO military exercises experienced a slight uptick in 2018 at 286 NATO and/or allied exercises, just as U.S.-led efforts along NATO’s eastern flank have expanded: where 6,000 soldiers participated in 2015’s Exercise Saber Strike—a capstone-level exercise in defending the Baltics—18,000 personnel participated in 2018.¹³ Intended to give teeth to NATO’s eastern promises and deter Russia, the administration also pushed NATO to create the so-called “30-30-30-30 Plan” and ready 30 battalions, 30 aircraft squadrons, and 30 ships to deploy to Eastern Europe within 30 days.¹⁴ Related efforts involve the new creation of NATO headquarters to secure the Atlantic Ocean sea lines of communication and facilitate troop movement in

Montenegro, Assures Balkans of U.S. Support,” 2 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/europe/pence-montenegro-markovic-nato.html>.

¹⁰ White House Press Office, “Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Mark Rutte,” 3 July 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-prime-minister-mark-rutte/>; White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg Before Expanded Bilateral Meeting,” 17 May 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-stoltenberg-expanded-bilateral-meeting/>.

¹¹ Lucie Beraud-Sudreau and Nick Childs, “Hidden Figures: US Spending on EU Security is only 4.5 percent of Pentagon Budget,” *Security Times*, February 2017, https://www.securityconference.de/fileadmin/MS_C/2017/Sonstiges/ST_Feb2017_double_page.pdf; Lucie Beraud-Sudreau and Nick Childs, “The US and Its NATO Allies: Costs and Value,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies Military Balance Blog*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/07/us-and-nato-allies-costs-and-value>.

¹² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), “European Deterrence Initiative: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2019,” February 2018, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2019/fy2019_EDI_JBook.pdf.

¹³ U.S. Army Europe, e-mail to author, 13 July 2018. Thanks go to Don Wrenn at U.S. Army Europe’s Public Affairs Office for help in supplying this data. Since the program began, Saber Strike’s growth has been remarkable, rising 850 participants and 5 countries in 2011 (the first year), to 2000 participants and 13 countries in 2013, 6,000 participants and 13 countries in 2015, and 18,000 participants from 19 countries in 2018.

¹⁴ Victoria Leoni, “Here’s How the US is Preparing for a Possible Russian Attack in Europe,” *Military Times*, 6 June 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/06/06/heres-how-the-us-is-preparing-for-a-possible-russian-attack-in-europe/>.

Europe during a crisis, and ongoing debates over whether to permanently station troops in Eastern Europe.¹⁵ NATO expansion, meanwhile, remains alive and well, with the alliance admitting Macedonia at its July 2018 summit. Finally, the substantial engagement in Ukraine begun after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea continues unabated.¹⁶

On the other side of the ledger, the Trump administration's approach to intra-alliance bargaining remains divisive.¹⁷ Prior administrations operated on the assumption that the best way to resolve intra-NATO disputes was to embrace NATO's utility while working through established channels to bring allies around on the United States's preferred solutions, be it on burden-sharing or military strategy. This is what made prior public ruptures (such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's 2011 public criticism of allied free-riding, or Cold War-era tensions over NATO nuclear doctrine) so noticeable: they made public the tensions that were more often hidden behind the fiction that NATO was—as advertisements for the musical *Cats* used to proclaim—“now and forever.”¹⁸

Trump has reversed this approach. Rather than ex ante treat NATO as valuable, the current administration has embraced the possibility that the United States might exit NATO at some point—that the alliance is not itself sacrosanct—in order to wring allied concessions on issues of interest. Consistent with Trump's contractual approach to international relations,¹⁹ two issues have become the focus of particular American attention: allied defense spending, and terms of trade.²⁰

¹⁵ Michael Birnbaum and Seung Min Kim, “Trump Berates NATO Allies and then Asks Them to Double their Defense Spending Goals,” *Washington Post*, 11 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/trump-says-germany-is-captive-to-russia-in-fiery-opening-salvo-against-nato/2018/07/11/56aa7174-7f0a-11e8-a63f-7b5d2aba7ac5_story.html.

¹⁶ Ewen MacAskill, “Europeans Brace for Worst from Trump at Stormy NATO Summit,” *The Guardian*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/10/europeans-brace-for-worst-from-trump-at-stormy-nato-summit>; “Stoltenberg to Discuss Poroshenko, Margelashvili Refoms in Defense Sphere, NATO's Support for Ukraine, Georgia,” *Interfax News Agency*, 10 July 2018, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/517128.html>; Humeyra Pamuk, “NATO Formally Invites Macedonia to Join Alliance,” *Reuters*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-declaration/nato-formally-invites-macedonia-to-join-alliance-idUSKBN1K12AR?il=0>.

¹⁷ For a related analysis, see Raymond Kuo, “Trump's Strategy to Get NATO to Spend Money Is Working – But Will It in the Long Run?” *The National Interest*, 11 July 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trumps-strategy-get-nato-spend-more-working%E2%80%94will-it-long-run-25531>.

¹⁸ Neil Simon, “‘Cats,’ Now and Forever,” *The New Yorker*, 25 July 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/cats-now-and-forever>.

¹⁹ As Trump remarked when welcoming Stoltenberg, “We need to be reciprocal. Countries have to be reciprocal in what we're doing. Unfair that some countries pay, and some countries work, and some countries are loyal and terrific, and other countries aren't;” see “Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg Before Expanded Bilateral Meeting.”

²⁰ For stark illustration, see Trump's remarks after the 2018 Brussels Summit at White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump at Press Conference after NATO Summit,” 12 July 2018,

Repeating themes from his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump and his administration have routinely expressed discontent with allied defense contributions and suggested that the U.S. may back away from NATO if the situation does not change. Thus, when introducing his National Security Strategy in December 2017, Trump bluntly explained that strengthening NATO meant that the United States “would not allow member states to be delinquent in the payment [of NATO] while we guarantee their safety and are willing to fight wars for them. We have made clear that countries that are immensely wealthy should reimburse the United States for the cost of defending them.”²¹ More evocatively, Trump included a hypothetical conversation with NATO and, in particular, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a late June 2018 rally in Montana in which he imagined telling NATO “you got to start paying your bills” and Merkel that “I can’t guarantee it, but we’re protecting [Germany] and it means a lot more to you than protecting us because I don’t know how much protection we get by protecting you.”²²

Still, clearest of all was Trump’s behavior before and during the 2018 Brussels Summit. As Trump wrote allied leaders in advance of the meeting, if the allies did not increase defense spending, then “it will become increasingly difficult to justify to American citizens why some countries continue to fail to meet our shared collective security commitments.”²³ He then followed this up at the meeting itself by abruptly demanding allies increase their defense budgets by January 2019—six years in advance of their current commitments—or risk finding the United States “very unhappy.”²⁴ Although Trump apparently walked back his demands in the face of allied pressure—even subsequently praising the result to reporters—the effort was there.²⁵ As the

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-nato-summit-brussels-belgium/>.

²¹ White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump on the Administration’s National Security Strategy,” 18 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

²² Julian Borger, “Worries NATO Partners Wonder if Atlantic Alliance Can Survive Trump,” *The Guardian*, 8 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/08/nato-atlantic-alliance-survive-trump-analysis>.

²³ Christopher Woody, “Trump Reportedly is Joking about Pulling the US Military Out of NATO, and No Allies are Laughing,” *Business Insider*, 27 June 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-reportedly-is-joking-about-pulling-the-us-out-of-nato-2018-6>. The text of the letter is available at: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/WLAavj/donald-trump-til-erna-solberg-norge-maa-oppfylle-toprosentmaalet>.

²⁴ Michael Birnbaum and Philip Rucker, “At NATO, Trump Claims Allies Make New Defense Spending Commitments after He Upends Summit,” *Washington Post*, 12 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/trump-upends-nato-summit-demanding-immediate-spending-increases-or-he-will-do-his-own-thing/2018/07/12/a3818cc6-7f0a-11e8-a63f-7b5d2aba7ac5_story.html; Jeff Mason and Robin Emmott, “Trump Brings Reality-Show Style to NATO, and Leaves Satisfied,” *Reuters*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-trump-style/trump-brings-reality-show-style-to-nato-and-leaves-satisfied-idUSKBN1K22Q5?il=0>.

²⁵ In fact, Trump was asked by several reporters after the Summit whether he threatened American withdrawal from NATO if U.S. terms were not met; he avoided a direct response. See White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump,” 12 July 2018.

European Council on Foreign Relations' Jeremy Shapiro points out, the specific terms sought by Trump are largely irrelevant: far more significant is Trump's willingness to try overt coercion in the first place.²⁶

Second, Trump sharpened efforts to link U.S.-European economic relations with U.S. security guarantees.²⁷ This issue was sublimated during the first part of 2017, but has become a renewed focus of attention in the administration's second year. At the same Montana rally in which decried NATO defense spending, for instance, Trump also said U.S. citizens were "schmucks" for simultaneously protecting Europe via NATO while—allegedly—tolerating substantial trade deficits with European member states.²⁸ He followed this with a series of tweets—certified since 2017 as official presidential statements²⁹ - hammering the point home. "The United States is spending far more on NATO than any other Country," he wrote on 9 July 2018, before continuing "On top of this the European Union has a Trade Surplus of \$151 Million [sic] with the U.S., with big Trade Barriers on U.S. goods. NO!" He followed that up with another tweet claiming, "We protect Europe (which is good) at great financial loss, and then we unfairly clobbered on Trade. Change is coming!"³⁰ And, even when *en route* to the Brussels Summit, he underlined that "The European Union makes it impossible for our farmers and workers and companies to do business in Europe (U.S. has a \$151 Billion trade deficit), and then they want us to happily defend them through NATO, and nicely pay for it. Just doesn't work!"³¹

This effort then hit a high note at and after the Brussels Summit. During a discussion with Stoltenberg on the morning of the Summit, Trump singled out Germany for exploiting American security largesse while enjoying ostensibly unfair economic practices. "I think it's very sad," Trump explained, "when Germany makes a massive oil and gas deal with Russia, where you're supposed to be guarding against Russia, and Germany goes out and pays billions and billions of dollars a year to Russia" while at the same time "Germany

²⁶ Jeremy Shapiro, "Trump's Meaningless NATO Spending Debate," *European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary*, 9 July 2018, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_trumps_meaningless_nato_spending_debate.

²⁷ For acknowledgment of this development, see Stoltenberg's comments reported in NATO, "Doorstep Statement," 11 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_156730.htm.

²⁸ Ian Schwartz, "Trump on NATO: 'We're the Schmucks Paying for the Whole Thing,'" *Real Clear Politics*, 5 July 2018, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/07/05/trump_nato_were_the_schmucks_paying_for_the_whole_thing.html; Krishnadev Calamur, "Trump's Message to NATO," *The Atlantic*, 8 July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/trump-nato-putin-summit/564536/>.

²⁹ Lorelai Laird, "DOJ Says Trump's Tweets are Official Presidential Statements," *ABA Journal*, 14 November 2017, http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/government_says_trumps_tweets_are_official_presidential_statements.

³⁰ Marc Champion, Patrick Donahue, and Hayley Warren, "Trump Is Itching for a Fight at NATO," *Bloomberg*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-nato-summit/>.

³¹ Tweet dated 10 July 2018. For his remarks while attending the Summit along similar lines, see Jonathan Allen, "Trump's European Trip: Trade Wars, Brexit Chaos – and a Russia Quandary," *NBC News*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-s-european-trip-trade-wars-brexit-chaos-russia-quandary-n889606>.

is just paying a little bit over 1 percent [for defense], whereas the United States, in actual numbers, is paying 4.2 percent of a much larger GDP.” “That’s inappropriate also,” he concluded.³² Nor was this all, as Trump continued in this vein shortly before meeting British Prime Minister Theresa May following the Brussels Summit. In an interview with *The Sun*, the U.S. president first criticized May’s leadership before offering a starkly clear view of what he sees as the unfair security-economics link, explaining: “The United States is protecting the, you know, countries, most of which are the EU, and frankly, if you look at it, we get a double-barrel hit. We get hit on trade, where they treat us badly, they have barriers against us trading and you know, strong barriers and tariffs, and we get hit on NATO. So we have a double whammy, a double hit.”³³ Of course, the United States has been down this road before: as Frank Gavin’s research shows, the United States tried to force the European members of NATO to cut the United States favorable economic deals at the height of the Cold War.³⁴ Nevertheless, Trump’s effort is a break from the post-Cold War norm, as well as a substantial change in the form of U.S. efforts.

Compounding the emergence of overt U.S. coercion are two other issues: Trump’s ongoing outreach to Russia and his administration’s lackadaisical diplomatic engagement in Europe. On one level, Trump renewed long-standing concerns that he might take a soft-line on Russia when he scheduled a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately after the 2018 NATO Summit. Coming after Trump took a softer rhetorical approach on Russia’s annexation of Crimea, meddling in the 2016 presidential election, and domestic crackdown, U.S. allies have voiced concerned that Trump might adopt policies (e.g., reduced military presence, sanctions relief) that undercut allied positions.³⁵ Ultimately, although the United States has bolstered NATO’s anti-Russian efforts and taken a firm diplomatic line against Moscow, Trump’s claims that “getting along with Russia and with China and with everybody is a very good thing” generates uncertainty over American fidelity to this cause.³⁶ Needless to say, as problematic as concessions to Russia is the risk that

³² White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Bilateral Breakfast,” 11 July 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg-bilateral-breakfast/>

³³ Euan McKirdy, “What President Trump Said about May, Brexit, and ‘England’,” *CNN.com*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/13/politics/trump-sun-uk-interview-intl>.

³⁴ Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁵ Steven Erlanger and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Poised to Enter Meeting as Wild Card Among Allies,” *New York Times*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/09/world/europe/donald-trump-nato-summit-russia-putin.html>; Trudy Rubin, “Allies Fear Trump will Kick Them, Hug Putin,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/commentary/trump-nato-putin-1.19724411>; Robert Hutton, “U.K. Worries About What Trump Could Promise Putin,” *Bloomberg*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-27/u-k-said-to-worry-about-what-trump-could-promise-to-putin>.

³⁶ “Putin-Trump Summit Set for Helsinki on July 16,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 28 June 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/white-house-kremlin-jointly-announce-putin-trump-summit/29324935.html>; NATO, “Brussels Summit Declaration.” Of course, Trump has downplayed these concerns by pointing to his decision to strengthen NATO and only meet with Putin from a position of allied solidarity; see White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister May of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference,” 13 July 2018,

Trump might attempt to inaugurate a cooperative U.S.-Russian relationship. If this—a scenario long-feared by Europeans—emerged, then not only might the U.S. and its European allies end up holding vastly different assessments of European threats, but it could end up increasing U.S. coercive leverage over its allies.³⁷ After all, in this scenario, the U.S. could still more credibly threaten to exit Europe or—alternatively—work with Russia to bilaterally resolve European security over the heads of NATO members, unless NATO members concede on trade, defense spending, and whatever other issues the U.S. desires.

Finally, Trump has short-circuited the normal diplomatic channels through which U.S. policy in Europe—relating to NATO and beyond—is executed. Rumors abound that European policymakers cannot obtain a clear picture of U.S. priorities outside the security realm.³⁸ Embassies are understaffed, whereas many key officials are only newly in office. Although this does not change the substance of U.S. policy per se, it means that the chances of miscommunication, miscalculation, and lapses in policy implementation have gone up accordingly. This issue, of course, does not only affect U.S. relations with NATO, but it does carry particular salience. Tellingly, for instance, Trump’s first NATO meeting in 2017 was significantly reduced in scope owing to what *Politico* terms the “lack of an agenda.”³⁹

From Delian League to Athenian Empire?: Prospects for Future U.S.-NATO Relations

The questions remain: what have been the consequences of the administration’s strategy, and is the approach sustainable? On one level, the blowback from the policy has been obvious. Scarcely a day goes by when analysts on one or both sides of the Atlantic suggest that Trump’s policy will irrevocably undermine NATO and/or the “liberal international order” that the alliance ostensibly supports. In this telling, by suggesting that NATO might be disposable, engaging with Russia, criticizing allies, and demanding budgetary and trade concessions, the United States under Trump imperils NATO’s current operations and future cohesion.

To be sure, NATO’s European members (and Canada) have legitimate reason to worry. Although the substance of U.S. engagement remains intact, the demands placed on the United States’s allies and threats of abandonment if U.S. terms are not met leave NATO’s European members over a barrel. Having underinvested in their defense since the end of the Cold War, these states are vulnerable if Trump actually decides to alter the U.S.-NATO relationship. At the same time, because much of U.S. policy remains consistent with prior years, the short-term incentive to change course is limited. Indeed, preempting the United States when U.S. security assurances and military commitments remain intact would require American allies to face difficult domestic and regional political battles for uncertain gains. Baldly stated, the allies are trapped by a combination of prior choices and short-term exigencies that seem difficult to overcome. hat

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-joint-press-conference/>.

³⁷ For discussion of European fears that the U.S. might craft a geopolitical deal for Europe over their heads, see Glenn Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36:4 (July 1984), 486-488.

³⁸ See, for instance, the 9 July 2018 tweet by Georgetown University Professor Abraham Newman detailing discussions with European diplomats and policymakers.

³⁹ David M. Herszenhorn, “Trump’s Neglect of Europe Goes Beyond Angry Tweets,” *Politico*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/10/trump-europe-nato-britain-putin-706138>.

worries about Russia have grown over the last several years reinforces this dynamic, making a departure from the United States's security blanket—no matter how scratchy the blanket may be—even less palatable.

Presumably because they are both vulnerable to Trump's machinations and benefit from U.S. security guarantees, the European response has thus been to placate the president and accede to many of Trump's demands. Scarcely a meeting with NATO policymakers goes by in which they do not pledge to increase their military expenditures. Although defense spending has been on the upswing since 2014, allied decisionmakers also praise Trump for his "leadership" on this issue, thereby giving Trump credit for decisions long in the making.⁴⁰ Similar dynamics are evident on economic issues. On one level, European leaders largely shrugged off and remained passive in the face of Trump's attacks on European economic policy (and, in May's case, their own leadership).⁴¹ As significantly, Merkel has underscored her interest in discussing "economic developments...and also the future of our trade relations" while emphasizing "we wish to continue to cooperate in the future."⁴²

Concurrently, NATO's European members embrace signs that the U.S. remains committed to European security, quickly signing on to the aforementioned 30-30-30 Plan and welcoming U.S. policymakers they believe to be committed to the transatlantic relationship.⁴³ Indeed, European policymakers themselves largely reaffirm that NATO is operating well. Despite occasional rhetoric that the United States is becoming an

⁴⁰ NATO, "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a Meeting with President of the United States Donald J. Trump," Speech transcript, 11 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_156854.htm; Sophia Besch, "Defence Spending in NATO: Stop Convincing Trump, Start Convincing Europeans," *Centre For European Reform Insight*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/defence-spending-nato-stop-convincing-trump-start-convincing-europeans>. Unsurprisingly, Trump is also quick to take credit for these moves—for instance, claiming at the Brussels Summit that "We really accomplished a lot with respect to NATO. For years, presidents have been coming to these meetings and talked about the tremendous expense for the U.S. And tremendous progress has been made – everyone has agreed to substantially up their commitment;" see "Trump Declares Victory at NATO, says U.S. Now 'Treated Fairly,'" *CBS*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-nato-germany-allies-pressure-defense-spending-brussels-4-percent/>. For earlier comments along similar lines, see "Trump Tweets 'Money is Beginning to Pour In' To NATO," *Reuters*, 27 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g7-summit-trump-nato-idUSKBN18N0DD>.

⁴¹ Steven Erlanger and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump vs. Merkel: Blistering Salvo Meets Quiet Rejoinder," *New York Times*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/world/europe/germany-merkel-russia-trump-nato.html>; White House Press Office, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister May of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference," 13 July 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-joint-press-conference/>; "May Ignores Trump's Insults for Sake of UK," *The Scotsman*, 14 July 2018, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/leader-comment-may-ignores-trump-s-insults-for-sake-of-uk-1-4768722>.

⁴² "Trump Changes Tone in Merkel Meeting after Earlier Slamming Germany," *Reuters*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-trump-merkel/trump-changes-tone-in-merkel-meeting-after-earlier-slamming-germany-idUSKBN1K1208?il=0>.

⁴³ Phil Stewart and Robin Emmott, "As Trump Confounds, Mattis Seen as Quiet Champion among NATO Allies," *Reuters*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/trump-confounds-mattis-seen-quiet-champion-among-nato-164836113.html>.

unreliable partner and disengaging from Europe,⁴⁴ most allied policymakers argue—in the words of the Polish Foreign Minister—that “alliance with the US is the cornerstone of our security.” In this view, and as German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen explained, Europe can accept and move past U.S.-European tensions insofar as disagreements are “normal among allies.”⁴⁵

Nor is this just rhetoric, as European efforts to hedge against a possible American departure remain limited. The European Union’s (EU) Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative, for example, is largely designed to help develop aspirational capabilities that might be acquired by European militaries at some future date rather than provide a safehouse in the event of further U.S. pressure or a U.S. exit.⁴⁶ Even then, European states that might be interested in hedging against NATO via the EU have been kneecapped by the decision to make PESCO “complementary” to NATO, thereby ensuring that NATO retains its primary role in European security. Likewise, while interest in a European Union contingency coalition of the willing is growing, Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and other European leaders seem to view this force as a fallback that will operate only if and when the U.S. and NATO choose not to act.⁴⁷ These initiatives may well lay the groundwork for more intensive intra-European security cooperation. For now, however, they remain aspirational and leave NATO’s European members vulnerable to U.S. pressure.

Uncertainties and Drivers of Change

Combined, the response to the Trump administration’s change to the United States’s alliance management strategy has thus—ironically—helped make the policy viable. By remaining embedded in (still strong) transatlantic structures, attempting to engage Trump’s demands, and emphasizing the necessity of transatlantic cooperation, European reactions have themselves provided little incentive for the Trump administration to change course. Despite protests over the United States’s policy, a new equilibrium has emerged that helps make American policy stable over the short-term.

⁴⁴ 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/>; “Sorbonne Speech of Emmanuel Macron—Full Text,” 26 September 2017, <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

⁴⁵ Quotes from tweets by Olivier Schmitt, 11 July 2018, at the NATO Brussels Summit. See also Margaret Talev, Lyubov Pronina, Patrick Donahue, and Nikos Chrysoloras, “U.S. Congress Backs Alliance in Message to Trump: NATO Update,” *Bloomberg*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-11/trump-strikes-combative-tone-as-leaders-arrive-nato-update>.

⁴⁶ “European Council, “Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) First Collaborative PESCO Projects – Overview,” n.d., <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32079/pesco-overview-of-first-collaborative-of-projects-for-press.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Paul Taylor, “Emmanuel Macro’s Coalition of the Willing,” *Politico*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macrons-eu-defense-army-coalition-of-the-willing-military-cooperation/>; Jacob Hanke, “Merkel Endorses Macron’s EU Military Plan,” *Politico*, 3 June 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-endorses-eu-military-plan/>; “Sorbonne Speech—Macron.”

Whether this policy remains viable ultimately depends on several factors. The first is whether NATO can withstand the United States's rhetorical broadsides and coercive efforts. Analysts who are fearful that the Trump administration is endangering the transatlantic alliance seemingly expect that Trump's rhetoric and coercion will ultimately drive a wedge between the United States and its European partners. In this view, Trump's willingness to lambast allied free-riding, link economics and security, and criticize NATO's members on whatever issues he wants will ultimately compel American allies to drift away. This is plausible. Still, it is equally possible that, provided the United States never carries out its threats of abandonment and maintains the substance of transatlantic cooperation, coercion and rhetorical attacks will not imperil the core of NATO relations. In this scenario, European allies may well grumble and lament the coercive turn in American policy, but their short-term incentive to cheap-ride would continue and contribute to long-term alliance stability. The approach to transatlantic bargaining would change, but the alliance would itself stay together.

Second, much will hinge on what the United States seeks to extract from its European allies. To date, the concessions sought by the U.S. administration have been tolerable. European leaders, for instance, have long acknowledged that Europe underprovides for its own defense and suffers a security deficit. In this regard, Trump's criticism of European defense spending is an attack on an easy target. Macroeconomic issues are more sensitive insofar as they are harder to evaluate, carry larger domestic costs, and are harder for governments to influence in the short-term, but they are also long-standing points of friction inside the alliance. However, there is no guarantee that Trump (or a successor) will keep these terms intact. Indeed, as one analyst rightly points out, Trump has already received enough concessions to declare victory in his dealings with NATO members; that he has shown no interest in doing so implies that his administration may make continued use of the United States's coercive leverage in the future.

Should this come to pass and the United States increases the demands put upon European allies—seeking, for instance, to involve them in a war or attacking their domestic policy—then allied calculations may change. If U.S. terms become too onerous, the relative merits of sustaining cooperation in NATO and bearing the short-term costs of U.S. pressure, or bearing the costs of reorienting their security relations for the sake of long-term freedom from the United States, may change. In this scenario, greater European efforts at hedging their security bets by distancing themselves from the United States and/or growing intra-European security cooperation are likely.

A closely related problem concerns what may happen if NATO members respond to American demands, only for the United States to move the goal posts. Popular sentiment in allied states is turning against the U.S.⁴⁸ Likewise, allied policymakers are discovering that they can often improve their own domestic standing if they appear to stand up to Trump or otherwise resist U.S. demands.⁴⁹ Meeting the United States's current

⁴⁸ Griffé Witte and Michael Birnbaum, "As Tensions with Trump Deepen, Europe Wonders if America is Lost for Good," *Washington Post*, 19 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/as-tensions-with-trump-deepen-europe-wonders-if-america-is-lost-for-good/2018/05/18/6f90c56e-587f-11e8-9889-07bcc1327f4b_story.html; Jack Holmes, "Trump's First Year: Everyone Hates Us Now," *Esquire*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a15367684/trump-world-leadership-gallup-poll/>; Jon Stone, "Germans Want Donald Trump to Pull US Troops Out of Germany, Poll Finds," *The Independent*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/us-troops-germany-public-opinion-pull-out-nato-summit-merkel-a8442021.html>.

⁴⁹ Merkel, for example, was able to outflank political challengers last summer by suggesting Germany might move away from the United States. More recently, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's popularity surged after he opposed Trump's alliance and trade demands at the 2018 G-7 Summit. It should also be noted that rally around the flag

demands, meanwhile, is already proving costly both financially and politically.⁵⁰ If the United States moves the goalposts, it is possible that allied leaders may feel it politically expedient to make of show of further resisting U.S. demands, or that allied publics pressure leaders along the same lines.⁵¹ Allied security dependence on the United States makes it unlikely that the alliance would collapse due to such domestic forces, but popular resentment and domestic political maneuvering could make future intra-alliance negotiations more difficult. Similarly, American capriciousness could make it more appealing for European states to accept the short-term costs associated with fostering an effective intra-European security identity.

U.S. policy under Trump may also prove self-limiting. The current American approach relies on the European allies lacking the military capacity to provide for their own security. If no substantial changes in the military equation occur, then allies will remain vulnerable to American rule by a rod of iron. If, however, the European allies respond to Trump's demands and strengthen their military position (as appears to be happening), then the United States's ability to coerce in the future will diminish proportionally; the more Europe spends on defense the weaker the United States's leverage.⁵² Similarly, greater European military spending may also contribute to a militarily strengthened alliance better able to provide for European security.⁵³ Although U.S. influence over its allies is unlikely to end entirely—the U.S. presence may mitigate the chance of intra-European security competition—this scenario means that American strategy may contain the seed of its own obsolescence. Ultimately, by simultaneously seeking outcomes that would diminish its

effects may play into this dynamic: May, for instance, saw even her political opponents rally to her side after Trump attacked her leadership in his *Sun* interview. See Friedman and Shiffrin, "Trump, NATO, and Establishment Hysteria;" Paul Viera, "Canada Gives Trudeau a Trump Bump after G-7 Summit," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/canada-gives-trudeau-a-trump-bump-after-g-7-spat-1530273600>; Silva Amaro, "Even May's UK Opponents are Backing Her Against Trump," *CNBC.com*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/13/even-mays-uk-opponents-are-backing-her-against-trump.html>.

⁵⁰ Mason and Emmot, "Trump Brings Reality-Show Style."

⁵¹ There may also be financial and political limits to NATO members' ability to meet existing—let alone changed—American demands. See Teresa Wright, "Trudeau Bills Pre-Existing Defence Plan as Answer to Trump's NATO Spending Call," *The Star*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/07/12/trudeau-bills-pre-existing-defence-plan-as-answer-to-trumps-nato-spending-call.html>; Birnbaum and Rucker "Trump Claims Allies Make New Defense Spending Contributions."

⁵² This is not to suggest that U.S. leverage would disappear. Rather, U.S. leverage would be lower if greater allied defense expenditures were allocated to national or intra-European forces (assigned to NATO or otherwise). In this scenario, European states would have both greater capacity for their defense and—through the growth of their defense industries—would be able to sustain this autonomy irrespective of U.S. policy. Conversely, if allied defense spending were used to procure U.S. military equipment, then the allies would remain dependent on the U.S. for sustaining existing forces even if they were less beholden to the U.S. for supplying forces for European defense. For a related discussion of defense spending and U.S.-European relations, see Rachel Rizzo and Gene Germanovich, "The US Should Embrace the EU's New Defense-Cooperation Plan," *DefenseOne*, 12 May 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/05/us-should-embrace-eus-new-defense-cooperation-plan/148158/>. See also Kaija Schilde, *The Political Economy of European Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵³ Of course, the macroeconomic effects of defense spending would depend on where the spending was allocated and what it procured.

bargaining power inside of NATO and reduce the consequences of American abandonment, the United States's policy may have a shorter shelf-life than immediately apparent.

Finally, one needs to know whether Trump's policy will continue over time. This is not a foregone conclusion after the Trump administration. Americans traditionally care little about foreign policy, just as most mainstream American politicians support NATO.⁵⁴ The bench of policymakers loyal to the post-Cold War consensus remains deep. Future American administrations may therefore revert back to the pre-Trump status quo and, presuming this new/old approach is embraced by other elites, winnow down intra-NATO concerns. On the other hand, the more other elites embrace Trumpian alliance coercion and/or make an American withdrawal from NATO a greater possibility, the more likely a deeper break in the transatlantic status quo.⁵⁵

By the same token, however, Trump himself could change course during his remaining time in office. Whether by dint of a procrustean strategy or inattention to the details of policy adjustment, he has remained content thus far with issuing threats without altering the substance of U.S. engagement. This, in turn, has allowed the foreign policy bureaucracy to continue what it was designed to do: sustain the course of American foreign policy. Should, however, Trump ever become motivated to, e.g., withdraw troops from Europe or make the United States's commitment to NATO more conditional than it is already, then there would be little to stop him.⁵⁶ After all, bureaucrats and senior policymakers alike serve at the will of the president, making them inherently responsive to persistent signals emanating from the Oval Office.⁵⁷ Furthermore, given Trump's own dislike of being corralled, contained, or influenced by his advisers, impediments to decision-making on a presidential whim—such as pressure from other stakeholders and/or small group dynamics among a narrow band of elites—are comparatively reduced.⁵⁸ In turn, should Trump make a concerted effort to reorient the substance of U.S. policy come to fruition, it remains an open question

⁵⁴ "U.S. House Speaker Ryan Says NATO is Indispensable," *Reuters*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-usa-ryan/u-s-house-speaker-ryan-says-nato-is-indispensable-idUSKBN1K1248?il=0>; Ted Barrett, "Senate Takes Swipe at Trump with Pro-NATO Vote," *CNN.com*, 11 July 2018.

⁵⁵ For hints of allied concern along these lines, see Birnbaum, "Ahead of NATO Summit, Allies Wonder: Will NATO Survive Trump," *Washington Post*, 8 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ahead-of-nato-summit-allies-wonder-will-nato-survive-trump/2018/07/08/3af62604-8134-11e8-b3b5-b61896f90919_story.html.

⁵⁶ To be sure, members of the foreign policy establishment and/or Congress might try to stop a large-scale change. Given the large powers granted the president in foreign affairs and the president's control over the Executive Branch, it would however be difficult to prevent a concerted effort to alter the United States' relationship with NATO. On the power of the foreign policy establishment in most circumstances, see Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42:4 (Spring 2018): 9-46.

⁵⁷ Robert J. Art, "Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique," *Policy Sciences* 4:4 (December 1973): 467-490.

⁵⁸ See for example "Report: Tensions Grow Between John Kelly, Trump," *CBS News*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-tensions-grow-between-kelly-trump/>; David Frum, "The Problem with 'Containing' Donald Trump," *The Atlantic*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/corker-trump/542409/>.

whether the other members of NATO would seek the United States's continued engagement, or allow the change to play out and accept the costs of providing for their security.

Conclusion

As Trump heads towards the mid-point of his term, the United States's policy vis-à-vis NATO remains a mixture of old and new. Substantive cooperation and affirmations of U.S. fidelity (for now) to the transatlantic relationship are intact, continuing the trend of the last seventy years. Still, the United States has carved out a new policy of coercing its European allies by suggesting transatlantic cooperation may wane if the allies fail to accede to American demands on defense spending, trade, or whatever issues the Trump administration decides to raise. Although threats of allied defection are not new either in world politics or in transatlantic relations, Trump's decision to issue these threats publicly, to link a number of security and non-security concessions to these threats, and his equivocation over whether NATO has ex ante value are all a departure from the norm. Intra-alliance bargaining is always difficult, but the United States's abrupt departure from prior practice has left allies reeling. Whether NATO will adapt, thrive, or wither away—let alone what consequences any of these outcomes would carry for European security—remains an open question.

Joshua Shiffrin is an Assistant Professor of International Relations with the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University where his research focuses on U.S. grand strategy, international security, and diplomatic history. He is the author of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Cornell University Press, 2018).