U.S. NATO Policy in the Age of Trump: Controversy and Consistency

Jorge Benitez

ABSTRACT

NATO is the most powerful alliance in the world and an integral part of U.S. national security. Since its creation in 1949, every American president has recognized its value and supported the transatlantic Alliance. But from describing NATO as obsolete to threatening to leave the Alliance, Donald Trump has been the harshest critic of NATO ever to sit in the White House. It is important to identify President Trump's specific views on NATO and how they have changed from his days as a candidate to his position as president. Despite repeated attempts by U.S. and foreign officials to soften Trump's criticisms of NATO, the best source of the President's true position on NATO is Trump himself. This careful study of Trump's direct statements about the Alliance reveals an American president growing more critical of NATO allies and willing to take greater risks to try to increase their contributions to collective defense. This policy is not working. Instead, the President should pursue a more nuanced and long-term policy to strengthen one of the most valuable elements of U.S. national security.

> *"A strong Europe is a blessing to the West and to the world.… One hundred years after the entry of American forces into World War I, the transatlantic bond between the United States and Europe is as strong as ever and maybe, in many ways, even stronger."*
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> **— PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP IN WARSAW, JULY 6, 20171**

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Relations between the United States and its European allies are at an unprecedented stage in transatlantic history. President Donald Trump has privately and publicly expressed a very negative view of NATO and the behavior of U.S. allies toward the United States. According to NATO's former highest military commander, retired Admiral James Stavridis, "The alliance is at a moment of high tension…. Something is new and dangerous."[2]

The tone of Trump's criticisms of NATO is new and much more divisive than the disagreements between previous presidents and U.S. allies. They sometimes exchanged sharp words, but these were usually in private and directed at specific allies rather than NATO itself. Trump's approach to NATO is dangerous because no other president has questioned NATO's key role as a fundamental part of U.S. national security.

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Nevertheless, Trump is not alone in his disappointment with the way allies have treated the United States. Earlier presidents and senior officials may not have been as blunt or threatening, but there is consistent evidence of a loss of U.S. patience for what is perceived as feeble attempts by NATO allies to meet their defense commitments to the Alliance. Therefore, it is important to properly understand what is new about Trump's NATO policy and what is part of a larger trend of changing U.S. expectations about the Alliance.

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS DURING THE LAST TWO ADMINISTRATIONS

At times, Trump's comments about NATO have been positive and consistent with the unbroken support the Alliance has received from all presidents since it was created in 1949. For example, days after being sworn in as president, Trump made statements that could have been made by any of his predecessors since Harry Truman, noting, "We strongly support NATO. We only ask that all of the NATO members make their full and proper financial contributions to the NATO Alliance."[3]

Presidents have sometimes argued with NATO allies over individual transatlantic issues. However, with the exception of Trump, every president following World War II has recognized and defended the essential role of the Alliance itself in U.S. national security. From the beginning of the Alliance, Harry Truman made this clear, saying, "Let there be no mistake

about it—the unity of the nations of Western Europe and of the North Atlantic area is vital to their security and to ours."[4] Throughout the decades since the creation of NATO, presidents of both parties have continued to see the value of NATO as one of the most important contributors to U.S. national security. For example, Ronald Reagan maintained presidential support for the Alliance, arguing that NATO was "the core of America's foreign policy and of America's own security."[5]

The recent administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama provide further evidence of bipartisan support for NATO and appreciation for its key role in U.S. national security. Bush described NATO as "the most effective multilateral organization in the world, and the most important military alliance in history."[6] In addition to NATO's influential role in the world, Bush saw the Alliance as a top national security assets. "The Atlantic Alliance is America's most important global relationship," he said.[7] Like Bush, Obama made it clear that the Alliance was at the heart of America's national interest, calling NATO "the lynchpin, the cornerstone of our collective defense and U.S. security policy."[8] Obama also acknowledged that as president, he was the chief steward of decades of bipartisan presidential support for the Alliance that kept the peace in Europe:

> Our alliance with our NATO partners has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy for nearly 70 years—in good times and in bad, and through Presidents of both parties—because the United States has a fundamental interest in Europe's stability and security.[9]

Although American leaders recognize the value of NATO, there exist longstanding disagreements with allies over the issue of burden-sharing. Historically, U.S. presidents have said that the European members of the Alliance do not spend enough for their own defense, arguing that this creates unfair pressure for the United States to fill in the gaps. Thus, in addition to their support of NATO as a pillar of U.S. national security, Bush and Obama also called on allied leaders to boost their defense commitments. Bush declared this issue one of his priorities at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, where he disclosed, "I will encourage our European partners to increase their defense investments."[10] This continued under Obama, who also expressed apprehension about allies not fulfilling their defense commitments. "[E]very NATO member should be contributing its full share…. I'll be honest, sometimes Europe has been complacent about its own defense."[11] Near the end of his second term, Obama went even further. In a controversial interview, he disclosed his personal displeasure with the behavior of many allies, commenting, "Free riders aggravate me."[12]

These statements echo some of Trump's remarks about NATO. They

demonstrate that American leaders are becoming more impatient with the persistent burden-sharing imbalance with European allies, marking a frequently overlooked yet nevertheless dangerous decline in the U.S. attitude toward the behavior of its allies. They are proof that Europe has underestimated the corrosive effect of its attitude toward fulfilling the NATO defense commitment. These comments demonstrate that the problem of burden-sharing is serious and will continue to jeopardize transatlantic relations after Trump, unless significant progress is made. Trump no doubt feels validated by these criticisms from previous presidents. But Trump also feels that previous presidents were unsuccessful because they did not make sufficient effort to pressure NATO allies to fulfill their defense commitments. As a result, Trump appears willing to take greater risks than any of his predecessors. Trump summed this up after his last NATO summit in 2018:

> Now, what has happened is, presidents over many years, from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, they came in, they said, "Okay, hey, do the best you can," and they left. Nobody did anything about it. And it got to a point where the United States was paying for 90 percent of NATO. And that's not fair. So it's changed.[13]

To properly understand this widening gap between the United States and NATO allies, it is essential to recall the timely warning from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. In 2011, Gates spoke in very direct language to emphasize to Europe the gravity of the problem, stating, "I am the latest in a string of U.S. defense secretaries who have urged allies privately and publicly, often with exasperation, to meet agreed-upon NATO benchmarks for defense spending."[14]

He then made one of the starkest warnings about the health of the Alliance, stating, "[I]f current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."[15] Gates did not advocate for such a change in U.S. NATO policy, but he feared that if allies did not make a significant change, future U.S. leaders would lose faith in the most powerful alliance in U.S. history. This warning may now seem prophetic with the rise of Trump, but even Gates must have been surprised at how quickly his warning proved true.

TRUMP BREAKS FROM HISTORICAL PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT FOR NATO

As we have seen, Trump is not the first president to complain that NATO allies are not contributing their fair share of defense spending to

the Alliance. But Trump has done two things his predecessors avoided. First, he has publicly questioned the value of NATO to U.S. national security. Second, Trump has publicly questioned the validity of U.S. defense commitments to NATO allies. These two deviations from decades of bipartisan presidential support for NATO have weakened the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance and caused fears in allied capitals that under the Trump administration, the U.S. may not help defend them should they face a foreign attack.

Trump's views on NATO should be understood and examined in two phases: his statements about NATO as a candidate during the 2016 presidential campaign and his statements about NATO since he became president.

CANDIDATE TRUMP'S VIEWS ON NATO

Initially, candidate Trump's NATO policy was composed of three main elements: first, NATO is obsolete; second, NATO allies owe the United States money; and third, the United States may decline to fulfill its defense commitments to allies that have not met their financial commitments.

NATO is Obsolete

Trump's views on the Alliance first gained world-wide attention early in the 2016 presidential campaign when he announced, "NATO is obsolete."[16] No U.S. president had ever made such a negative statement about America's most powerful alliance. Trump's condemnation of NATO showed that he stood apart, not only from the other Republican candidates, but also from every president since Truman. Trump offered two explanations for why he believed NATO was obsolete. One explanation was that NATO exists for a different threat in a security environment that no longer exists. "When NATO was formed many decades ago we were a different country. There was a different threat."[17] Trump linked his claim to his view of Russia, saying, "I think NATO is obsolete. NATO was done at a time you had the Soviet Union."[18] Trump's statements revealed that he did not believe Russia posed a threat that justified a military alliance such as NATO. Perhaps most striking was that Trump overlooked the many reasons why NATO remains valuable to U.S. national security.

One of the main benefits of NATO is that it helps pacify historic rivalries and dangerous nationalism in Europe. After the costs of two world wars, preventing another major conflict in Europe was a top U.S. national security objective at the time of its establishment. Through NATO, all of the great

powers in Europe (except Russia) cooperate on security rather than compete with one another. For almost seventy years, millions of European soldiers, sailors, and airmen have trained and exercised together in NATO, instead of against each other when the alliance was formed. NATO fulfills its purpose at a cost of only about 5 percent of the U.S. defense budget.[19] Despite disagreements over burden-sharing, NATO remains a transatlantic bargain.[20]

In addition, NATO members provide the United States with billion-dollar military bases of incalculable geostrategic value. These bases outside of North America allow the United States to project its power globally at far less cost than unilateral alternatives, and in some cases in ways that could not be duplicated solely by U.S. efforts. In addition, the costs of these bases are subsidized by host nations, further saving U.S. taxpayer dollars. It would be a great loss to U.S. national interest if Trump withdrew the United States from NATO and denied the country these strategic facilities.

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Trump's second reason for why NATO is obsolete rested on his misperception that the Alliance does not fight terrorism. "[W]e have other threats. We have the threat of terrorism. And NATO doesn't discuss terrorism. NATO's not meant for terrorism," he said during the campaign.[21] Going further, candidate Trump repeatedly called for a new alliance to replace NATO. "I think, probably a new institution maybe would be better for that than using NATO which was not meant for [terrorism]."[22] While Trump offered contradictory statements throughout the campaign regarding NATO, it appeared that, at the very least, he was convinced, "We don't really need NATO in its current form."[23]

NATO Allies Are Not Paying Enough for NATO

Candidate Trump's expressed top priority regarding NATO was to make allies pay more. The actual agreement between the allies is for each NATO member to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product on its respective national defense budget. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced in 2018 that only eight of NATO's twenty-nine members would meet this defense-spending goal.[24]

But candidate Trump's rhetoric reflected a lack of understanding regarding the defense-spending goal. "Many NATO nations are not making payments, are not making what they're supposed to make."[25] Of note is the fact that Trump emphasized the need for allies to make payments to the Alliance, instead of the actual commitment for allies to spend more on defense. To clarify, when a NATO member such as the United States increases the Pentagon's budget and spends more on defense, these funds go to U.S. companies and personnel costs. They are not payments sent to NATO or any other member.

Trump argued that NATO allies should pay more for financial and ethical reasons, saying, "I'll tell you the problems I have with NATO…. [W]e pay far too much."[26] Trump also erroneously claimed that the United States has had to make payments to cover the "debt" from allies that owe money to the alliance. "[M]any countries owe us a tremendous amount of money for many years back, where they're delinquent, as far as I'm concerned, because the United States has had to pay for them."[27]

Finally, Trump complained that allies were acting unethically and taking advantage of the United States, saying, "NATO is unfair, economically, to us, to the United States."[28] Ultimately, the view that NATO is unfair to the United States was at the heart of candidate Trump's views on the Alliance. "I don't think it's fair, we are not treated fair."[29]

Trump Questions U.S. Defense Commitments to NATO Allies

The third major element in candidate Trump's views on NATO was that he felt less bound by U.S. defense commitments to allies. This is another major break from previous U.S. presidents. One of the main reasons for not questioning U.S. defense commitments to NATO is that it weakens deterrence in Europe and raises the risk of foreign aggression.

Trump's suggestions that his administration may not honor U.S. defense commitments to NATO allies is connected directly to his feelings about NATO allies not meeting their financial commitments."If we cannot be properly reimbursed for the tremendous cost of our military protecting other countries…then yes, I would be absolutely prepared to tell those countries, 'Congratulations, you will be defending yourself,'" he said.[30] When asked by *The New York Times* if NATO allies can count on the United States to come to their assistance should they be attacked by Russia, Trump made it clear that his decision would be based on one consideration—namely, money. "Have they fulfilled their obligations to us? If they fulfill their obligations to us, the answer is yes," he responded.[31]

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S VIEWS ON NATO

Just a few weeks after becoming president, Trump began to exhibit more traditional and reassuring rhetoric about his administration's commitment to defend U.S. allies. "America stands with those who stand in defense of freedom. We have your back every hour, every day, now and always," he said.[32] Yet, he noted, "That also means getting our allies to pay their fair share."[33] In addition, Trump placed leaders with years of experience and understanding of NATO in top positions in his administration. Two of the most influential Trump officials were H. R. McMaster as National Security Advisor and James Mattis as Secretary of Defense. During their respective tenures in the administration, they helped Trump see the value of NATO to U.S. national security, but were not able to dissuade Trump from repeating his criticisms of the Alliance. This led to a strange combination of rhetoric. On the one hand, as president, Trump began expressing robust U.S. support for the Alliance, saying, "We stand firmly behind Article 5, the mutual defense commitment."[34] But on the other hand, Trump continued to link this support to change in the behavior of allies, saying, "Europe must do more."[35]

NATO No Longer Obsolete

Three months after he became president, Trump met for the first time with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. In a joint press conference, Trump praised NATO in glowing terms he had not used during the presidential campaign and expressed a much more positive personal view of the U.S.-NATO relationship.[36] Trump also revealed a new position on NATO's value to the United States. "I said it was obsolete; it's no longer obsolete," he announced, in effect publicly reversing his earlier controversial condemnation of the alliance.[37] However, Trump did not see his new attitude toward NATO and fighting terrorism as a change in his policy. Instead, he gave himself credit for making the Alliance change its position on terrorism. "The Secretary General and I had a productive discussion about what more NATO can do in the fight against terrorism. I complained about that a long time ago and they made a change, and now they do fight terrorism."[38] Since then, Trump has appeared satisfied with NATO's role in fighting terrorism. When he does bring up the issue, it is to argue that NATO is coming around to his way of thinking.[39]

Make Allies Pay

Nevertheless, Trump's main position on NATO, that allies should pay more, has not changed. If anything, he has become more emphatic

on this point. Describing his tempestuous experience at the 2018 NATO summit, he said, "I told the people of NATO…they've been delinquent. They haven't been paying. I said, you gotta pay. You gotta pay. You gotta pay."[40]

Describing NATO allies as delinquent has become a new element in Trump's view of the Alliance. For example, the text of Trump's National Security Strategy makes one of the strongest statements about NATO contribution to U.S. national security. It reads, "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."[41] But in his remarks at the official release of the key document, Trump described U.S. allies as delinquent and emphasized their need to pay back the United States. "I would not allow member states to be delinquent in the payment 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," he said.[42]

Trump has acknowledged that he is breaking decades of support for NATO from U.S. presidents. "This is a major departure from the past, but a fair and necessary one—necessary for our country, necessary for our taxpayer, necessary for our own thought process."[43] He connects his departure from the traditional U.S. support for NATO to the issue of fairness, asserting, "Many nations owe vast sums of money from past years and it is very unfair to the United States. These nations must pay what they owe."[44]

Trump's Defense Commitment to Allies is Still Conditional

Although Trump has made some positive statements about NATO and at times offered reassurance that his administration will honor defense commitments to NATO, he continues to link U.S. defense commitments directly to whether he feels specific allies have paid enough. Moreoever, he has made this tit-for-tat connection more explicitly than he did before he was elected. Trump reinforced this caveat at the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels. He made it clear that "the United States' commitment to NATO is very strong, remains very strong, but primarily because…the amount of money they're willing to spend."[45] Therefore, although Trump has stepped up his willingness to support NATO, he has also stepped up his insistence that U.S. support is conditional on his perception of the how much allies meet their financial obligations to the United States.

THREE NEW ELEMENTS IN TRUMP'S NATO POLICY

In his second year in office and after two summits with allied leaders, Trump's NATO policy has become even more disruptive. He has threatened to leave NATO, claiming that he does not need congressional approval to withdraw the U.S. from the NATO treaty, and linked support for NATO to an escalating trade war with Europe.

Trump Threatens to Leave NATO

The most dangerous addition to Trump's NATO policy is his newly expressed threat to withdraw from NATO if allies do not increase their defense spending to meet his expectations. This marks the first time in the history of the Alliance that a U.S. president has publicly threatened to withdraw from NATO.

According to reports,[46] in his private meeting with other NATO leaders in July 2018, Trump threatened to withdraw U.S. forces from the Europe if allies did not "put up more money."[47] U.S. officials denied these reports, as did leaders of other NATO member states. But a few weeks later, Trump confirmed that he had made the threat to NATO leaders behind close doors.

According to Trump, the President of a NATO nation asked him, "Would you leave us if we don't pay our bills?" Trump said he responded directly, "I would have to consider it. You gotta pay your bills." Trump then modified his initial answer, however, and made it more stark, saying, "Yes, I will leave you. If you don't pay your bills."[48] Trump acknowledged that his European counterparts "hated my answer." But he believed that this unprecedented threat from a U.S. president made the other NATO leaders "put up more money." He claimed that after he declared the possibility of withdrawing from NATO, "You could see those checkbooks coming out for billions of dollars" from Europe.[49]

This was also not the first time Trump had raised the possibility of leaving NATO. Trump revealed earlier that he had hinted at the possibility during his first NATO summit in 2017, "[T]hey've been delinquent. They haven't been paying. I said, you gotta pay. You gotta pay. You gotta pay…. And I guess I implied you don't pay we're out of there; right?"[50] Thus, despite denials by officials, the President himself acknowledged that in 2017 he threatened to leave NATO before making that threat much more directly in 2018.

Friction with NATO Allies Also Linked to Trade

In addition to his threat to leave the Alliance, another element in Trump's NATO policy is a new connection between the burden-sharing problems of NATO members and growing trade problems with Europe. After complaining about unfair trade practices by economic partners, Trump in 2018 raised tariffs on steel and aluminum imports.[51] At the 2018 NATO summit, Trump connected these two disagreements with European allies, accusing the European Union of treating the United States "very unfairly on trade."[52] There were reports that he also adversely connected trade to NATO at his meeting with G-7 leaders. Trump is reported to have proclaimed, "NATO is as bad as NAFTA. It's much too costly for the U.S."[53] These statements help explain Trump's approach in threatening NATO allies. His escalating trade quarrel with European allies has made him less willing to compromise on NATO's burden-sharing problem. This will make it more difficult for U.S., allied, and NATO officials to convince Trump to uphold the U.S. defense commitment to Europe.

Trump Dismisses Role of Congress

To further complicate Trump's NATO policy, the President appears to have a critical misunderstanding of the limits of his power with regards to withdrawing the United States from NATO. Before Trump left the Brussels summit, a journalist asked him whether he was still threatening to "potentially pull the United States out of NATO for any reason" and whether he believed he needed congressional approval for such a move.[54] Trump responded that he did not think congressional approval was necessary. His answer seemed to confirm that he did make such a threat to withdraw the United States at the summit, and it tried to remove Congress from the issue. Yet the NATO treaty was ratified by the Senate in 1959 and members of Congress are sure to put up a fight if any U.S. president tries to terminate such an alliance that is so important for U.S. national security. In fact, congressional efforts to prevent Trump from withdrawing the U.S. from the NATO treaty have already begun.[55]

Trump's NATO Policy Promoted by Senior Officials

One of the most widely held theories about Trump's NATO policy is that key pro-NATO leaders in his administration can influence the President and moderate his negative approach to the Alliance. While some senior officials in the Trump administration recognize the value of NATO

and promote positive relations with allies, the extent of their ability to contain Trump's combative approach to NATO should be scrutinized.

The most prominent case is former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, a former NATO commander who repeatedly spoke in favor of the Alliance. In 2017, he told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "I believe NATO is central to our defense."[56] But even Mattis made Trump-like threats aimed at NATO allies. During his first trip to Brussels as Secretary of Defense, Mattis echoed Trump's rhetoric that U.S. defense commitments to NATO should be conditional on allies fulifilling their defense-spending commitments. Mattis warned his counterparts, "If your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this alliance, each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defense."[57] He emphasized that the Trump administration would no longer accept superficial agreements that failed to improve allied efforts at burden-sharing, "No longer can the American taxpayer carry a disproportionate share of the defense of Western values. Americans cannot care more for your children's future security than you do."[58]

National Security Advisor John Bolton, a former U.S. Ambassador to the UN and a supporter of NATO, presents a particularly interesting case. In 2016, Bolton criticized Trump's doubts about whether the U.S. should to defend NATO allies. According to Bolton, "That is an open invitation to Putin to attack."[59] Bolton also said that such a conditional and ambiguous U.S. position would destabilize Europe. "If the leader of the NATO alliance…shows weakness or uncertainty it destroys those structures of deterrence that we worked more than 65 years to build up," he said.[60] Nevertheless, after he was chosen to be Trump's National Security Advisor in 2018, Bolton became a top spokesman for Trump's NATO policy. "The president makes the policy. I don't make policy," he has explained.[61] Still, Bolton has attempted to present Trump's policy in a more nuanced manner. When asked if Trump had threatened to leave NATO if allies didn't pay their bills, Bolton replied, "That's not exactly what he said…. [He] wants [them] to live up to the commitment that they made."[62] Bolton has not publicly admitted the President threatened NATO allies. Instead, he presents Trump's alliance policy in terms that are firm, but not directly hostile towards NATO:

> The president wants a strong NATO. If you think Russia's a threat, ask yourself this question, why is Germany spending less than 1.2 percent of its GNP? So when people talk about undermining the NATO alliance you should look at those who are carrying out steps that make NATO less effective militarily.[63]

THE CONSEQUENCES OF TRUMP'S NATO POLICY

What are the consequnces of the changes in Trump's NATO policy? Trump left the 2018 Brussels summit with a very optimistic assessment, arguing, "[T]remendous progress has been made; everyone has agreed to substantially up their commitment."[64] But not everyone agrees. A senior European diplomat expressed shock at Trump's treatment of NATO leaders during the summit, commenting, "It's like the world has gone crazy this morning…. Trump's performance was beyond belief."[65] Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright described the mood in Europe as one of "both fear and confusion."[66]

Even Republicans are uncomfortable with Trump's NATO policy. For example, Senator Bob Corker, then chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, expressed serious concerns about the President's rough approach to NATO. Corker admitted to worrying that Trump was trying to "tear apart" NATO. He expressed particular discontent with Trump's style of diplomacy with U.S. allies, adding, "I think there are ways of communicating with your friends and sometimes it feels like we punch our friends in the nose."[67]

Trump's Threat to Leave NATO

Despite pressure from leaders in both major political parties and members of his own administration, Trump appears determined to carry out his threat to leave NATO. His behavior at NATO meetings is more antagonistic than ever. He has made criticzing NATO part of his domestic agenda, proving to his base that he is being tough on unfair allies. Trump is losing his patience with NATO and has promised more negative U.S. actions if allies do not meet his unrealistic financial goals. It is clear that the majority of allies will not meet their defense-spending pledge this year, next year, or even by 2024, the deadline set at the 2014 Wales summit. Therefore, Trump is highly likely to be more upset and disappointed at future meetings with NATO leaders.

Practically every U.S. and NATO official the author discussed these facts with is hopeful that Trump will soften his demands and not follow through on his threats. Yet the president's own statements prove that Trump has made NATO a higher priority than it was during the campaign, and his behavior toward allies has become more disruptive and antagonistic. Thus, it seems that NATO and Trump are on a collision course in which allies will not meet NATO's defense-spending goal and Trump will carry out his

threat to leave NATO. The combination of these two trends is dangerous for the future of the Alliance.

What would leaving NATO look like under Trump? Trump's most probable initial response would be to reduce U.S. contributions to NATO, rather than fully withdraw from the Alliance. This reduction could be in the form of troops, money, or both. Before the Brussels summit, the *Washington Post* reported that the Pentagon was re-evaluating the costs of U.S. troops based in Germany.[68] Recently, Polish President Andrzej Duda offered to host and fund a U.S. base in Poland.[69] He even suggested naming it "Fort Trump." This would allow Trump to move U.S. troops from an ally he views as not fulfilling financial obligations to the U.S. and NATO, to Poland, an ally that plans to spend above NATO's 2-percent goal[70] and also to buy billions of dollars worth of U.S. technology to strengthen its defense.[71] Thus, one of the most likely options for Trump to reduce U.S. support for NATO may be to move U.S. troops and bases from Germany to another NATO member or back to the United States.

It seems that NATO and Trump are on a collision course in which allies will not meet NATO's defense spending goal and Trump will carry out his threat to leave NATO.

Another option is to reduce the money the United States spends on European security. A key element of this is Trump's European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), which asks Congress for almost USD 5 billion for 2018 to strengthen deterrence in Europe.[72] This program began in 2014 under a similar name (European Reassurance Initiative) under the Obama administration as a response to Russia's attacks against Ukraine. It comes in addition to the resources included in the Department of Defense's regular budget for all U.S. forces in Europe. EDI provides funding for improving infrastructure in Europe to move U.S. and NATO forces into threatened territory, more military exercises in Europe, and the rotation of more U.S. units to Europe for exercises and demonstrations of deterrence. This money is vulnerable to cuts by Trump because it is supplemental funding and therefore easier to cut than official Pentagon budget funds. It is also vulnerable because it is unilateral, provided freely by the U.S. and without significant ally contributions.

A strong case has been made that a better way for Trump to secure additional European defense spending would be to make EDI conditional on matching funds from European allies.[73] Matching EDI contributions is a more achievable goal for NATO allies than the 2-percent pledge and

it can be done quickly in the next annual budgets, instead of waiting for 2024. Allied contributions to EDI would also strengthen deterrence against foreign aggression.

THE FUTURE OF U.S. NATO POLICY DURING THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

An examination of Trump's statements about NATO and his treatment of allies reveals that the President is pursuing an increasingly negative approach to the Alliance. He has not softened his key criticism that allies "need to pay." Furthermore, Trump's contempt for NATO has grown, as he views European allies as behaving unfairly toward the United States through a combination of hostile trade policies and not paying enough for their defense. But most alarming, Trump has threatened to "leave" NATO, and his senior officials have warned of negative consequences if Trump's demands are not met soon.

It is also important to understand that NATO has become a higher priority for Trump than ever before. As a candidate, Trump did make controversial and attention-grabbing statements about NATO, but these were in response to questions from others. NATO was not something Trump raised on his own initiative. This changed after his first NATO summit in 2017. Part of this was a result of receiving more information and briefings to prepare him for major NATO meetings. Despite the hopes of many that more knowledge of NATO would moderate Trump's views on the Alliance, it seems to have had the opposite effect. This is because Trump, no doubt with the input of anti-EU and unilateralist advisors, has selectively interpreted facts about NATO to fit his pre-existing worldview that international organizations should not be trusted and that allies are taking advantage of the United States. Disrupting unjust trade agreements and negotiating better deals with allies—as seen with NAFTA—was always a top priority for Trump, and he has linked these negative disputes to the unfair behavior of NATO allies. This helps explain why making NATO allies "pay" is now a higher priority for Trump and why he has escalated his criticism of NATO by threatening to leave if allies do not do so.

In addition, NATO is no longer a subject Trump only discusses in response to questions from journalists. Rather, Trump chooses to criticize NATO at his campaign rallies. NATO has moved up on Trump's priority list from a slightly negative foreign policy issue to an important issue used to appeal to domestic supporters. Trump uses criticsm of NATO to demonstrate to his base how he stands up for America against unfair allies.

In the month preceding the NATO summit in July 2018, most presidents would have been preparing for important meetings with allied leaders. Instead, Trump took that time to express his criticism of the Alliance. At a June 5 rally in Great Falls, Montana, Trump told the crowd, "We are the schmucks paying for the whole thing," referring to NATO.[74]

After Trump's threat at the summit in Brussels, U.S. officials, NATO officials, and allied leaders all tried to deny the friction within the Alliance and to downplay its consequences. But Trump would not let the matter drop. A month after the NATO summit, Trump not only repeated his criticism of NATO at a campaign rally in Charleston, West Virginia, he also publicly acknowledged that he did threaten to leave NATO.[75] On September 6 in Billings, Montana, Trump gave his supporters more details about how he treated U.S. allies at the summit, saying he told NATO leaders, "You have to pay up. You are delinquents."[76]

Most recently, Trump repeated his strong feelings about NATO in a 60 Minutes interview that aired on October 14. Trump revealed the importance he places on trade disputes with European allies. "Nobody treats us much worse than the European Union…. We've been…the stupid country for so many years."[77] Furthermore, this trade friction is souring his outlook in dealing with most of these same allies inside NATO. "We shouldn't be paying almost the entire cost of NATO to protect Europe. And then on top of that, they take advantage of us on trade," he said.[78] Another key disclosure from the interview was the fact that Trump considers himself a top expert on NATO. Before he was President, Trump admitted that he did not "know that much about it (NATO)."[79] But in his 60 Minutes interview, Trump said believes he knows more about the Alliance than Secretary of Defense Mattis, a former NATO commander. "I like General Mattis. I think I know more about it (NATO) than he does. And I know more about it from the standpoint of fairness."[80]

Trump has not moderated his views on the Alliance. Instead he has become more confident that his alternative approach to NATO is advantageous for U.S interests. Therefore, the way to improve Trump's NATO policy is not by making him more informed about the Alliance, but rather by addressing his key concern that NATO allies are not being fair to the United States.

CONCLUSION

Since its creation in response to Soviet aggression after World War II, the majority of the U.S. public has consistently held favorable views of

NATO. But Trump's repeated public criticism of NATO may be having an effect on popular support for the Alliance. Support for NATO by Republicans decreased from 52 percent in 2016 to 47 percent in 2017, during the first year of the Trump administration.[81] Nevertheless, a strong majority of Americans polled have a favorable view of NATO. While Republican support for NATO may have gone down slightly, support for NATO by Democrats and Independents has increased significantly. As a result, overall public support for NATO has grown, from 53 percent in 2016 to 62 percent in 2017.[82]

Still, Trump's tough NATO policy is putting great strain on the Alliance. It will not convince the majority of U.S. allies to meet NATO's 2-percent defense-spending pledge by 2024. Moreover, reducing U.S. commitments to NATO and cutting contributions to the Alliance will only make the problem worse and may make hostile powers more willing to test the Alliance by using force or engaging in a hybrid attack against a NATO member. Instead of focusing on threats, Trump's NATO policy should propose feasible burden-sharing ideas that can be implemented quickly.[83]

But the key to a successful NATO policy from the Trump administration must be a more accurate perspective on the central role of NATO in U.S. national security. Trump needs to stop overestimating the harm from burden-sharing and underestimating the value of NATO to U.S. national interests. The security that NATO provides Europe, the North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean is worth much more to the United States than the 5 percent of the Department of Defense budget allocated to U.S. forces in Europe.

The key to a successful NATO policy from the Trump administration must be a more accurate perspective on the central role of NATO in U.S. national security.

It is critical that Trump appreciate the unique value that previous presidents saw in NATO. As George W. Bush described it,"These trans-Atlantic ties could not be severed by U-boats. They could not be cut by checkpoints and barbed wire. They were not ended by SS-20s and nuclear blackmail. And they certainly will not be broken by commercial quarrels and political debates."[84] NATO must not be evaluated simply as a transactional cost. It is a unique asset for the United States that protects American citizens, interests, and values. As Barack Obama explained,"Our nations are stronger and more prosperous when

we stand together. In good times and in bad, our alliance has endured; in fact, it has thrived—because we share an unbreakable commitment to the freedom and security of our citizens. NATO is a force multiplier…. There is nothing else like it on Earth."[85] Notably, on July 6, 2017, Trump gave one of his most powerful foreign policy speeches in Warsaw. In the speech, he made two strong statements. "Americans know that a strong alliance of free, sovereign and independent nations is the best defense for our freedoms and for our interests. That is why my administration has demanded that all members of NATO finally meet their full and fair financial obligation," he said.[86]

It is important that Trump recognize how his threats and demands are jeopardizing the significant value that NATO offers. If Trump leaves NATO or unintentionally breaks up the Alliance, the United States will not be able to replace it. Rather, the Trump administration should pursue alternative options to produce more responsible and fair behavior from NATO allies. As President, it is in Trump's interest to strengthen NATO and find more positive and feasible policies to resolve the burden-sharing problem.

NATO is the most powerful alliance in history and a key asset in U.S. national security. None of our competitors have anything like it. The loss of NATO would be a major victory for U.S. adversaries. As former Secretary of Defense Mattis has explained to the Senate Armed Services Committee, "history is clear: nations with strong allies thrive, and those without them wither."[87] ***f***

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