

It is Time to Reassess NATO's Value

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

It is Time to Reassess NATO'S Value, by CDR Scott P. Brunson, US Navy, 47 pages.

The United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 with sound justification. After 1945 the Soviet Union trailed only America in economic and military strength, while Western European nations strove to rebuild their countries. As these democratic nations could not effectively defend themselves from an aggressive Soviet Union, Western Europe and North America banded together to create NATO. European nations did recover, to the extent that they now enjoy standards of living that bear no resemblance to the state of affairs existing at the time of NATO's establishment. The European Union (EU), even without the United Kingdom (UK), is one of the world's most powerful economic players, possessing a larger population and a larger economy (pre-Brexit) than does the United States.

However, as many American statesmen and military leaders predicted when NATO was formed, European governments would lag in defense spending and development as long as the United States maintained troops on the continent and/or financially supported the NATO alliance. Once these predictions proved true over the following decades, successive United States (US) presidents repeatedly demanded that European countries spend more on defense. European leaders would agree in principle, but their actual financial commitments continually fell short. US leaders grudgingly bore the burden because they believed it was in their nation's interest to do so. Unfortunately, this approach, whether primarily altruistic or fundamentally self-serving, taught our European allies that no matter how little they invest in their own security, Washington will defend the continent.

As NATO's largest out of area missions, Resolute Support and Kosovo Force (KFOR), potentially wind down, alliance nations again must consider the alliance's purpose and future direction. Current European defense budgets and the history of the Libya military intervention illustrate that NATO member states rely utterly on US capabilities and thus more closely resemble clients or customers rather than partners or participants. Meanwhile, the United States finds itself focusing greater attention on the security of the Asia-Pacific region. Considering that resources are finite, the United States must make hard choices with their relationship with NATO.

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Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
DoD	Department of Defense
DoS	Department of State
EC	European Community
EDC	European Defense Community
EDF	European Defense Fund
EDI	European Deterrence Initiative
ERI	European Reassurance Initiative
EU	European Union
IP	Indo-Pacific
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
NSS	National Security Strategy
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS	National Defense Strategy
OAs	Operations, Actions, and Activities
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
R&D	Research and Development
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander in Europe
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
USG	United States Government
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

In the past, I've worried only about NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance: Between members who specialize in "soft" humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the "hard" combat mission. Between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership – be they security guarantees or headquarters billets – but don't want to share the risks and costs. This is no longer a hypothetical worry. We are here today. And it is unacceptable.

—US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2011)

In July 2002, Spain and Morocco entangled themselves in a dispute over Parsley Island, a small landmass in the Strait of Gibraltar, whose only permanent inhabitants are feral goats. The conflict began with twelve Moroccan soldiers landing on Parsley and claiming the island for their country. Spain responded by sending seventy-five of its own soldiers to evict the Moroccans and then raise their own flag. Each nation condemned the other's "aggression" and "acts of war." The European Union (EU) supported Spain while the Organization of Islamic Cooperation backed Morocco. Both Spain and Morocco asked Colin Powell, then the US Secretary of State, to arbitrate the disagreement. The request both exasperated and amused Powell. Previously unaware of Parsley Island and its rival claimants, the affair reminded him of *The Mouse That Roared*, a movie in which a small European country accidentally obtains a superweapon. The Parsley Island incident underscored a simple fact: the United States regularly involved itself in every facet of European politics after World War II (WWII). After 1945, the Truman Administration helped to rebuild Western Europe and created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while its successors created deep networks of cooperation with European elites and became heavily involved in their foreign policy. For example, the United States played a vital role in the creation of the European Economic Community, later the EU. After the Cold War, the United States brokered the German reunification process; led and supported the expansion of NATO, the EU, and democracy itself into Central and Eastern Europe; and intervened in the Balkan crises. This US policy remained consistent

throughout the Cold War and beyond, shaping Europe for six decades.¹ Unfortunately, the United States remained enmeshed in European affairs, both diplomatically and militarily, beyond when it was necessary, resulting in the United States continually providing leadership and resources for issues that the Europeans are more than capable of handling themselves.

American policy makers and security professionals questioned NATO's value to the United States from the outset, even prior to its founding by the Treaty of Washington in 1949. This skepticism continued into the following decade, but NATO eventually became a fundamental mainstay of American foreign policy. However, it is time to revisit this approach, as the environment has changed substantially: the Soviet threat eliminated, NATO membership expanded, and operations launched outside the continent. Although the efficiency of NATO over its seventy-one years is questionable, one must acknowledge that NATO lived up to its founder's expectations; the alliance deterred the Soviets from advancing militarily into Western Europe, and, with the exception of the Balkans conflicts, the European continent has been at peace. Numbering just twelve countries when it was created in 1949, NATO grew to sixteen members by the end of the Cold War. Since 1991, NATO has nearly doubled its membership by adding another thirteen countries. This organization protected Europe in the Cold War, unevenly came to America's defense after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and then deployed troops and civilian experts to Afghanistan. Additionally, NATO assisted new member states in avoiding conflict with each other, as it previously did with Greece and Turkey during much of the Cold War.² NATO also contributed to increased trade among members and facilitated the creation of the EU. In summary, NATO prevailed and ensured prosperity for many, though much was financed by the US taxpayer.³ Admiral James Stavridis, a former Supreme Allied Commander, eloquently describes NATO's success:

¹ Thomas Wright, *A Post-American Europe and the Future of U.S. Strategy*, Robert Bosch Foundation Transatlantic Initiative (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2017), 2.

² Michael O'Hanlon, *NATO's Limits: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe*, The Marshall Papers (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 1.

³ Don Thieme, "NATO Renewed," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (July 2014): 40.

History provides few achievements that compare to those seven decades of peace. They were built not on the ambitions of cold-eyed leaders but something more noble. NATO is a pool of partners who, despite some egregious outliers, by and large share fundamental values—democracy, liberty, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, gender equality, and racial equality. Admittedly we execute those values imperfectly, and they are stronger in some NATO countries than in others. But they are the right values, and there is no other place on earth where the US could find such a significant number of like-minded nations that are willing to bind themselves with us in a defensive military treaty.⁴

Thomas Wright from Brookings summarizes the success of NATO in this way, “...the United States helped create the conditions to transform Western Europe from a balance of power system to a security community where war between France, Germany, and the United Kingdom was not only unlikely but unthinkable and unplanned for.”⁵

However, the current European situation differs markedly from that of the Cold War. The current Russian threat poses challenges to Europe unlike those posed by the Soviet Union; there is little reason to believe Russia intends on invading Central or Western Europe. Moreover, with one or two exceptions the European member states have robust economies and spend prodigious amounts on social welfare programs. Given these facts, it appears time for these nations to do more, both individually and collectively. Unfortunately, so long as the United States underwrites European security, there is no impetus for European states to do so. With increased competition from China in Asia, Africa, and on the high seas, the United States can no longer maintain current levels of financial and military support for Europe. Europe must secure itself in order to allow the United States to compete against China’s challenge to a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”⁶ US resources are not infinite; the question this monograph poses and that America’s leaders must answer is, what future relationship or association should the United States pursue with NATO member states?

⁴ James G. Stavridis, “Why NATO Is Essential For World Peace, According to Its Former Commander,” *World Affairs*, *Time*, April 4, 2019, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://time.com/5564171/why-nato-is-essential-world-peace/>.

⁵ Wright, *A Post-American Europe and the Future of U.S. Strategy*, 3.

⁶ Phil Davidson, “China’s Challenge to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” US Indo-Pacific Command, October 1, 2019, accessed 8 January 2020, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/1976518/chinas-challenge-to-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

Literature Review

This literature review's purpose is to provide an understanding of the relationship the United States currently enjoys with NATO, examine the public conversations that surround this relationship, and determine if a different direction is required. Many credible authors and politicians have contributed to this discussion throughout the NATO alliance's history; this monograph will highlight some of the principal arguments. The review will provide a baseline understanding of the topic to be built upon by further analysis and lay the groundwork for the primary question to be answered in this paper.

Among the many sources regarding the best model for the United States' relationship with NATO, four stand out as especially useful: works by Hal Brands (the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies) and Peter Feaver (professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Duke University); Hans Binnendijk (Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins); a thoughtful piece written by James Stavridis, a retired US Navy admiral and former supreme allied commander; and a RAND team report led by Timothy Bonds (director of RAND's Washington DC offices). Brands and Feaver argue in "What Are America's Alliances Good For?" that the costs and risks correlated with America's military alliances are frequently overstated, while the benefits are often downplayed. They offer a more nuanced argument in support of America's alliances to better inform policy debates.⁷ In "Why NATO Is Essential for World Peace," Stavridis argued that on balance, the NATO alliance still provides a strategic benefit to the United States.⁸ Stavridis states that many of the American interests it served during the Cold War are still advanced by NATO today, and walking away from the alliance would cost the America more than remaining in NATO and strengthening it. He also describes NATO members' current domestic challenges, and calls out President Trump for

⁷ Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver, "What Are America's Alliances Good For?" *Parameters* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 28.

⁸ Stavridis, "Why NATO Is Essential For World Peace."

compounding the situation by rebuking the alliance during his 2016 campaign and badgering the allies to increase their level of defense spending. Stavridis concedes that Trump's rhetoric achieved some effect as several allies have finally stepped up their spending, but he asserts that this hostile and threatening tone comes at a cost by creating resentment and division. Worst of all, in Stavridis' opinion, Trump has called into question America's commitment to NATO's Article 5 clause. Stavridis does acknowledge there is room for improvement and proposes solutions he believes will help NATO in the near future.

Hans Binnendijk provides a history of NATO from conception to the present and then offers three scenarios for the future of NATO in "Between Continuity and Erosion: Three Scenarios for the Future of Transatlantic Relations." The first scenario is the status quo, with the United States continuing to play a dominating role. A more balanced relationship with Europe ascending and America descending describes scenario two. The third scenario envisions what is effectively a breakup of NATO. Binnendijk concludes by recommending the second, believing a balanced relationship is the best way forward although it will be challenging to execute in the near-term.⁹

In an article for the Royal United Service Institute journal, former US Marine Corps officer and US Naval War College professor Donald Thieme investigated some of the most pressing issues dominating the debate leading up to the 2014 NATO Wales Summit, and suggested six reasons why the United States needs to remain engaged in a renewed NATO. Although over five years have passed since he wrote "NATO Renewed: Building the New Strategic Transatlantic Alliance," his thoughts remain relevant. Thieme recommends that America remain in NATO, but with a modified construct. His argument supports the one made in the RAND study project "America's Strategy-Resource Mismatch: Addressing the Gaps Between U.S. National Strategy and Military Capacity." RAND researchers found the Department of Defense (DoD) lacks the resources to meet the ever-increasing demands placed on it by US policy. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) identifies long-term, strategic competition with

⁹ Hans Binnendijk, "Between Continuity and Erosion: Three Scenarios for the Future of Transatlantic Relations," 18th ed., vol. 7, *CEPOB: College of Europe Policy Brief* (Bruges, Belgium: College of Europe, 2018), 2.

China and Russia as the primary challenge to US security and the foremost priority for the DoD. Simultaneously, DoD is tasked with defending the homeland and deterring aggression in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. The NDS also directs DoD to counter North Korea and Iran and defeat any terrorist threat to the United States. In wartime, it must “be capable of: defeating aggression by a major power; deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere; and disrupting imminent terrorist and WMD threats.” The report states that the NDS cannot be adequately supported by DoD in its current form, producing the strategy-resource gap. The report also discusses the inherent disadvantage the United States imposes on itself as the global hegemon. Specifically, China’s expanding economy allows it to focus defense resources on rapidly growing a handful of specific military capabilities, while America must be concerned with wide-ranging global responsibilities. The report concludes that the United States can no longer sustain the military superiority in Asia that it has enjoyed for several decades.

In a paper written while a student at the US Army War College, then-US Navy Captain Thomas Hurley II contends in “NATO: Revisiting American Commitment,” that NATO failed to adapt to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. Hurley also suggests the EU is more than capable of providing its own security in Europe, but with the United States underwriting it, there is no motivation for the EU to step up and resource their militaries to do so. He also points out that requesting and cajoling the European member states to contribute more yields nothing meaningful. In his view it is time to try something new, to include reevaluating our NATO participation.¹⁰ Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor to the *National Interest*, argues in, “Trump Should Have Already Left NATO”, that America requires a more restrained and less aggressive foreign policy. Regarding Europe, Carpenter states this new posture does not mean the United States will ignore Europe; he believes every effort should be made to preserve a mutually beneficial transatlantic economic relationship and maintain our other connections with the continent. Furthermore, joint military

¹⁰ Thomas F Hurley, “NATO: Revisiting American Commitment” (Strategy Research Project, Carlisle Barracks, PA, US Army War College, 2013), 1.

exercises and even temporary deployments of US air and naval units, if the security environment turns more threatening, would be acceptable so long as America need not continue serving as Europe's security blanket. Carpenter also argues it is illogical for US leaders to deny their own country the freedom of policy choice while granting it to the rest of NATO. He concludes by declaring that a sustainable transatlantic policy for the twenty-first century must rely on the principle of maximum flexibility for the United States. ¹¹

Methodology

To properly assess NATO's current value to the United States, this research includes an analysis of the history of NATO's development in the aftermath of WWII and its post-Cold War transition. This history covers the major challenges to and accomplishments of NATO during these periods, including the Balkan conflicts and Libya intervention, using evidence that highlights the European member states' dependence on the United States for leadership and military capacity and capability. Also included are some of NATO's enduring issues, such as burden-sharing disputes and political challenges. This paper examines historic burden-sharing concerns, the outcomes of the disagreements, and whether progress (from an American perspective) has been achieved. Certain political differences among the larger NATO nations that affect the alliance nations are investigated as well.

After exploring the challenges and accomplishments, this monograph analyzes current threats to US and European security, as well as assessing proposals that claim to offer the best approach to overcome these threats. In addition to discussing the challenges to the European continent, security concerns in other regions are examined, notably China's aggressiveness in eastern and southeastern Asia. Considering China's growing economic and military capability, as well as its provocative behavior, it is

¹¹ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Trump Should Have Already Left NATO," Security-Foreign Policy, *The National Interest*, April 17, 2019, accessed 31 December 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-should-have-already-left-nato-52997?page=0%2C2>.

apparent the United States must devote more resources to meet the Chinese challenge if it desires to maintain the current world order.

History of NATO

NATO has essentially evolved through four phases since its inception in 1949:

- Cold War era: between 1949 and 1991;
- Transformation of the 1990s: marked by the start of the admission of former Warsaw Pact countries into NATO, and “out-of-area” military operations triggered by wars in the Western Balkans;
- Post-September 11, 2001: focus on crisis management and stabilizing Afghanistan;
- Post-2014 Russia invasion of Ukraine: a “renewed” focus on deterring Russia and heightened concern for threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa. NATO’s current Strategic Concept, adopted in 2010, articulates three broad activities for NATO: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security.¹²

Cold War Era

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) emerged from WWII a global power. As a result of its considerable military capabilities and the regime’s preoccupation with security, Soviet behavior in Eastern and Central Europe drove the formation of NATO in 1949. By 1955, Moscow controlled an empire of communist political satellites in Central and Eastern Europe, and no Western government knew how far Soviet leadership desired to expand.¹³ Conversely, the democratic nations of Western Europe emerged from the war economically weak, militarily depleted, and psychologically traumatized, incapable of defending themselves against an aggressive USSR without assistance and leadership from the United

¹² Paul Belkin, *Assessing NATO’s Value*, CRS Report R45652 (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 2.

¹³ Ted Galen Carpenter, “It’s Time to Rethink America’s Foreign Alliance Commitments,” *Security*, *The National Interest*, April 4, 2019, accessed 2 January 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/its-time-rethink-america%E2%80%99s-foreign-alliance-commitments-50717>.

States, leading to NATO's founding. Although the Soviet threat was the primary impetus for NATO's development, it is a fact that NATO had two additional aspirations at its beginning. NATO's founding documentation states that the three initial purposes of the alliance were: "detering Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration. Since 1945, American policymakers such as Harry S. Truman, George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Dean Acheson encouraged European nations' leaders to stand up to, and eventually balance, the Soviet Union. However, they quickly realized that economically devastated Europe wasn't strong enough to do so on their own, at least in the foreseeable future. Therefore, they accepted the need for a US leadership role in Europe, eventually including the long-term stationing of American military, air, and naval forces, until Western Europe regained sufficient strength to provide for its own security and defense again.¹⁴

The 1990s Transformation

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the reunification of Germany in 1990, and the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991, many questioned whether NATO should continue to exist, and if so, what form should it take. The United States and other allies agreed the alliance could still play an important role in achieving common security objectives beyond its previous mandate of Cold War territorial defense.¹⁵ In the mid-1990s, the allies agreed on a new posture based on a reduction of military forces and engagement of former adversaries in the Warsaw Pact. Shortly thereafter NATO adjusted its focus to spreading peace, stability, and democracy throughout the continent, a stance resulting in ten new member states between 1999 and 2004. NATO and Russia took the first steps toward partnership during this period as well.

¹⁴ Sara Bjerg Moller, "What Macron Got Right About NATO, Europe, and the Transatlantic Relationship," *Lawfare*, November 24, 2019, accessed 17 December 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-macron-got-right-about-nato-europe-and-transatlantic-relationship>.

¹⁵ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 3.

However, leadership in Moscow remained uneasy with NATO, and they later depicted NATO expansion towards their borders as a highly concerning security threat.¹⁶

Ethnic conflict within and adjacent to the former Republic of Yugoslavia, beginning in 1992, presented NATO with its first true challenge in the post-Cold War period. As the crisis unfolded, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic agreed that it was a European issue that European member states should handle. The Clinton Administration showed no interest in becoming enmeshed in this fight and ceded the initiative to Europe. European leaders, many resentful of the pre-eminent role of the United States in the alliance, regarded the conflict as an opportunity to assert their independence by solving a European security problem without relying on the United States for help. Unfortunately, the European Community (EC) lacked any mechanism to deal with the Yugoslavian implosion. After a series of failed attempts, the EC's leadership grudgingly recognized the necessity of American leadership in dealing with European security issues. The EC's failure revealed that NATO remained the only viable means for implementing military operations, and that NATO would continue to be the primary vehicle for American involvement in Europe well into the future.¹⁷

Once the crisis was officially handed over to NATO, it sparked debate amongst national leaders regarding "out of area" operations, as NATO's military posture had previously been limited to defending allied territory. The United States and other like-minded allies argued that, to remain relevant, NATO must be prepared to handle security threats outside of the alliance's territory. NATO's Western Balkans operation, beginning in Bosnia in 1995, was a first step in this direction. This event was especially important for Germany, which had been constitutionally barred from deploying its forces abroad since the founding of the West German state in 1949. At the request of the United States, NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept identified new security threats, including terrorism, ethnic conflict, human rights abuses, political

¹⁶ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 3.

¹⁷ Yanan Song, "The US Commitment to NATO in the Post-Cold War Period" (unpublished PhD Thesis, Durham, United Kingdom, Durham University, 2015): 25.

instability, and the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.¹⁸ NATO's European members consider the alliance's interventions in the Balkan conflicts a success, as its forces halted atrocities and reduced large-scale violence to small and sporadic occurrences. However, these conflicts also illuminated NATO's combined operations weaknesses, as well as NATO's utter dependency on the United States.¹⁹ Additionally, operations in Bosnia and in Kosovo revealed significant obstacles to reaching consensus inside the alliance, confounding timely and effective actions. In other words, NATO's structure offers a double-edged sword: it provides an avenue to confer legitimacy and credibility, but it decreases military effectiveness due to the consensus requirement. Furthermore, key NATO allies complained that the United States sought to turn NATO into a "global policeman", based on their perception that it was using this conflict as a test bed to learn if NATO could engage beyond its borders, particularly in the Middle East. Overshadowed by deficiencies in alliance strategy, NATO's capability and credibility faced reassessment within the United States, leading to a meaningful decision to bypass NATO when beginning Operation Enduring Freedom following the attacks on September 11, 2001.²⁰

Post-September 11, 2001

The 9/11 terrorist strikes provided a decisive point in NATO's evolution. For the first (and thus far the only) time, the alliance invoked Article 5 of the treaty, NATO's mutual defense agreement, and offered military assistance to the United States in responding to the attacks. Beginning in August 2003, NATO fielded a substantial military presence in Afghanistan, and in September 2006 assumed the overall responsibility for all military operations.²¹ Over the next thirteen years, Canada and the European allies joined the United States to conduct military operations in Afghanistan. In 2011, the peak of NATO's

¹⁸ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 3.

¹⁹ James Sperling and Mark Webber, "Trump's Foreign Policy and NATO," *University of Birmingham: Review of International Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2019): 11.

²⁰ Song, "The US Commitment to NATO in the Post-Cold War Period," 27.

²¹ *Ibid*, 28.

mission in Afghanistan, non-US NATO countries and partners provided approximately 40,000 of the 130,000 troops.

Many analysts viewed the considerable allied support to the United States following 9/11 as a powerful testament of NATO's enduring strength. Other analysts stressed that the United States only turned to NATO so it could take on a greater burden in Afghanistan after the United States launched military operations against Iraq in 2003. They argue that the United States would have been severely challenged to carry out both missions simultaneously without NATO support in Afghanistan. One could say that NATO operations in Afghanistan highlighted the some of the best traits of the alliance, including an established political institution in which to deliberate and provide order and direction, a military organization from which to plan operations and coordinate somewhat interoperable military forces. Conversely, this operation also accentuated the substantial disparities in allied military capabilities and member states' will to engage in combat operations. US officials, including many in Congress, consistently criticized the European allies, especially Germany, for shortfalls in capabilities and for national caveats that limited some nations' military's exposure to danger. This situation led to yet another renewed push for the allies to increase defense spending and develop military capabilities in order to better respond to the new security environment, including "out-of-area" stabilization and counter-insurgency operations.²²

Post-Russian Invasion of Ukraine -- 2014

Russia's annexation of Crimea and follow-on incursions into the *Donbas* region of Ukraine, as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) victories in Iraq and Syria, significantly changed the landscape for NATO. European member states simultaneously faced a new Russian military threat to the East, a migration crisis in the South, and terrorism inside its borders.²³ These events upended NATO's

²² Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 5.

²³ Binnendijk, "Between Continuity and Erosion," 2.

post-Cold War transformation into a more globally oriented security organization. The focus reverted to strengthening territorial defense capabilities in order to deter Russia. This renewed focus on collective defense and deterrence created an enduring tension within the alliance, principally between those states that perceive Russia as an acute threat and those that do not and prefer engagement. In addition, heightened fears about instability in the Middle East and North Africa have exposed differences between those allies more concerned about security threats from NATO's south and those that continue to prioritize deterring and managing Russia.²⁴

Early NATO Expectations, Perceptions and Policy

No American policy maker was more determined to leave Europe as soon as practical than Dwight Eisenhower. As early as 1947 he predicted that the United States would provide the resources to build Western Europe into an independent power that could balance the USSR. Once this threshold was attained, the United States would then pass the mantle to the Europeans and withdraw its forces from the continent, while remaining as a “balancer of last resort.” Eisenhower pinned his hopes on the European Defense Community (EDC), a still-born attempt to integrate the militaries of France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. An effective EDC would have freed the United States from a long-term commitment to defend Europe, either from the Soviet Union or from a rearmed West Germany. For Eisenhower, avoiding such a commitment was critical. In February 1951, newly-installed as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), Eisenhower wrote a colleague:

There is no defense for Western Europe that depends exclusively or even materially upon the existence, in Europe, of strong American units. The spirit must be here and the strength must be produced here. We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason than that these are *not*, politically, *our* frontiers. What we must do is to assist these people [to] regain their confidence and get on their own military feet (emphasis in original).²⁵

²⁴ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 5.

²⁵ John M. Schuessler and Joshua R. Shiffrinson, “The Shadow of Exit from NATO,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly-Perspectives*, no. Fall 2019 (Fall 2019): 42.

For Eisenhower, the stationing of American troops in Europe was a temporary measure, meant to buy time until the EDC could establish a capable military force.²⁶ Eisenhower's dilemma was that the Europeans, the French in particular, strongly opposed the development of the EDC. They correctly suspected the intended end-state was an American withdrawal, exposing France to the Soviet Union, and potentially, a rearmed and revanchist West Germany. In French President Charles de Gaulle's view, only the presence of US forces in Europe would deter the Soviets while preventing Germany from again dominating Western Europe.²⁷ A closer look at NATO's formative period shows that the United States actively considered leaving Europe throughout the 1950s. Even after resigning itself to staying in the early 1960s, the United States used threats of abandonment to put down the Franco-German revolt—the most significant challenge to its preponderant position in the NATO alliance.

Current Expectations, Perceptions and Policy

United States:

There is no doubt that NATO is a remarkable organization, in its size, its scope, and its success rate. US leadership and participation inside the alliance has been a key pillar of our foreign policy over the past seventy years. However, consistent critiques of the alliance's structure and of unequal burden-sharing remain unanswered.

President Trump's negative rhetoric regarding NATO spurs his critics to protest that his hardball tactics will drive a wedge between the United States and its European partners, endangering the alliance. By disparaging NATO as an institution, his detractors claim, Trump questions the commitments that have been at the heart of the American-led post-war international order. In fact, President Trump is simply the latest in a long line of US presidents to question the United States' enduring large-scale commitment to Europe. Although the Trump Administration issued its NATO criticisms, especially early in his

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Schuessler and Shiffrinson, "The Shadow of Exit from NATO," 45.

presidency, with a harsher tone and higher frequency than its predecessors, and better captured the world's attention, the complaints leveled align well with those of previous administrations, as does his overall support of NATO. For instance, his administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) both identify European security and stability as key US national security interests, and emphasize the US commitment to NATO and its Article 5 responsibility. Administration officials and their allies in Congress point out that the administration requested significant increases in funding for US military deployments in Europe in support of the Obama-era European Deterrence Initiative (EDI, previously known as the European Reassurance Initiative, or ERI).²⁸ Since Trump does not hesitate to dismantle any Obama-era policy he dislikes, we can only assume that his support for increased military rotations to Eastern Europe represent a clearly bipartisan policy approach.²⁹

Additionally, Trump reaffirmed the US commitment to Article 5, and the administration's FY2018 budget proposal requested a forty percent increase in funding for the ERI.³⁰ Rising above the Trump Administration's rhetoric and partisan opposition responses, it is evident that American military operations, actions, and activities (OAAs) reveal little change in the relationship between the United States and NATO since 2017. It may be that President Trump's heightened criticism of allied defense spending levels reflects a strategic choice; the recent military budget increases by NATO members remained aspirational for previous administrations. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg acknowledged that President Trump's attitude spurred the \$41 billion of additional defense spending by non-US NATO nations. Even so, the president's enemies in Congress and the media counter that

²⁸ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 12.

²⁹ Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, "Does Trump Have a Grand Strategy," *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2017): 1027.

³⁰ Vincent Morelli and Kristen Archick, "Transatlantic Relations in 2018," *CRS Insight* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2018), 2.

President Trump's scolding of US allies and his public questioning of NATO's utility unnecessarily damaged essential relationships and undermined NATO's cohesion.³¹

Europe:

In April 2019, Stoltenberg delivered a speech to the US Congress where, in addition to the requisite platitudes, he sought to reestablish the Russia threat as a unifying bond between the North America and the European member states.³² Although Stoltenberg rightfully deems Russia's activities as a concern, he fails to present a compelling argument when considering how disparate NATO allies view this threat. Countries bordering Russia, such as Stoltenberg's Norway, consider Russia an existential threat. It is no coincidence that six of the eight NATO countries spending approximately two percent of GDP on defense are former Soviet or Warsaw Pact nations in close proximity to Russia. Others bordering or near Russia such as Norway, Slovakia, and Turkey, also spend above the NATO median of 1.57 percent of GDP. The worldview for Central and Western European countries is much different, and they behave correspondingly. Except for the United Kingdom (UK) and France, every Central and Western European NATO country spends below the NATO median. They do not assess Russia as a grave enough threat to justify expending significant resources, and they do not spend money to assist their allies. Worse, a significant number are not inclined to defend those allies from Russian attack. For instance, a 2017 Pew survey found that only forty percent of Germans favored using their country's military to defend an ally if it was invaded by Russia. Given this fact, Chancellor Angela Merkel's refusal to significantly increase her government's defense spending, and her willingness to defy Germany's allies and go forward with a Baltic Sea gas pipeline—one that critics point out will make Europe more dependent on Russian gas supplies—makes perfect sense.³³

³¹ Belkin, *Assessing NATO's Value*, 16.

³² Henry Olsen, "It's Time to Rethink the NATO Alliance," Opinion, *Washington Post*, April 4, 2019, accessed 15 November 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/04/04/its-time-rethink-nato-alliance/>.

³³ *Ibid.*

In fact, while some in Europe admonished the Obama Administration for not doing enough to support Ukraine, many in Europe hope to profit from their Russian relationships while leaving others to bear the financial burden of contesting Russia. The aforementioned Baltic pipeline will double Russia's export capacity and deprive Ukraine of billions in gas transit revenues, a result directly opposed to what NATO's leaders have publicly stated regarding Russia and Ukraine. This project continues to expose deep divisions within the alliance, between the economic ambitions of individual member states and the interests of the Europe as a whole.³⁴ To underline this point, when asked whether he believed in Article 5's declaration of defense obligations when a member is attacked, French President Emmanuel Macron said simply, "I don't know."³⁵

As mentioned previously, many European states recently increased their defense investments, putting an end to the continuous decrease that had taken place since the 1990s, and promise to continue this trend.³⁶ This rise was modest, however. It was largely negligible until 2017, and as of 2019, despite now-general acknowledgment of the Russian threat and the Trump Administration's encouragement, it has not outpaced economic output significantly.³⁷ As a percentage of GDP, Europe's military outlays still remain below those of 2010, when the percentage fell to 1.59 percent that year.³⁸ In 2019, Europe-wide defense spending increased to 1.57 percent.³⁹

³⁴ Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad, "Europe Alone: What Comes After the Transatlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs; New York*, August 2019, 112.

³⁵ Jacob Heilbrunn, "Emmanuel Macron Is Right: NATO Is Over," *Global Opinions, Washington Post*, November 8, 2019, accessed 2 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/11/08/emmanuel-macron-is-right-nato-is-over/>.

³⁶ Polyakova and Haddad, "Europe Alone," 112.

³⁷ Doug Bandow, "The Outdated Alliance?" *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2019, accessed 13 November 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/03/the-outdated-alliance/>.

³⁸ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," *Annual Expenditure* (Brussels, Belgium: NATO Press & Media, March 15, 2018), 5.

³⁹ NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2019)," *Annual Expenditure* (Brussels, Belgium: NATO Press & Media, November 29, 2019), 8.

Although the spending increases can accurately be described as moderate, it is unquestionable they are trending in the right direction. Another recent positive occurrence concerns recognition by European member states that their collective defense spending is effectively diminished by redundancies and inefficiencies. Addressing this issue in 2017, the EU established Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a legally-binding series of projects designed to avoid inefficient or redundant military investments and coordinate efforts on cyberwarfare and energy security, among other activities. Additionally, in 2017, European governments created the European Defence Fund (EDF), which is designed to assist in financing transnational defense projects.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Europe has concluded trade agreements with other countries and regions, including Canada, Japan, and Latin America. Many welcome these events as efforts to reduce European dependence on the United States, though some consider it to be an alarming sign of transatlantic drift.⁴¹

NATO's Institutional Challenges

Burden Sharing:

Burden-sharing debates have always plagued NATO. During the Cold War, these arguments focused primarily on national contributions to NATO's defenses in opposition to the USSR. As early as 1951, as SACEUR, Eisenhower warned European allies that America's disproportionate military deployment in Europe was not sustainable in the long run. Throughout the rest of Cold War, the United States repeatedly demanded a more equal sharing of burdens, but never carried out its threats to leave the alliance when its bluff was called.⁴² US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in 2011 provided a recent example of a US empty threat when he stressed to his European counterparts that budgetary pressure made the current level of US commitment to the alliance unsustainable. Earlier that year his predecessor

⁴⁰ Polyakova and Haddad, "Europe Alone," 112.

⁴¹ Morelli and Archick, "Transatlantic Relations in 2018," 3.

⁴² Ellen Hallams and Benjamin Schreer, "Towards a 'Post-American' Alliance? NATO Burden-Sharing after Libya," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 88, no. 2 (2012): 314.

as Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, had also called for more equitable burden-sharing across the Atlantic. Specifically, he criticized the lack of defense spending on the part of most European allies and predicted a “dim, if not dismal, future” for the alliance if this trend was not reversed.⁴³ Well-regarded on both sides of the Atlantic, European leaders nevertheless ignored both Panetta and Gates, secure in their belief that United States would never leave Europe to fend for itself.

Michael John Williams of the University of London provides a British-centric view of this situation:

Washington policymakers are their own worst enemy when it comes to prompting Europeans to spend more on defence. Since the 1960s American leaders have complained about European defence spending. The classic American response to low European defence expenditure is to increase US defence spending, assuming evermore responsibility for European security. The United States now spends 4.6 per cent of GDP on defence whereas collective European defence spending is now 1.6 per cent of GDP.⁴⁴

Williams’ primary concern was not that the United States was being taken advantage of by its allies. Rather, he sought to persuade Britons of the potential danger to the UK should defense budgets shrink further. Williams argues that reduced defense investment will make Britain even more dependent on America. Although the David Cameron-led Conservative government advocated a foreign policy more independent from the United States at the time, Williams observed that defense cuts are a curious path to achieve Cameron’s goal, as defense cuts will only force the UK to rely more heavily on the United States, particularly when it comes to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and logistics.⁴⁵

At the 2002 Prague Summit, NATO member states concluded a “gentlemen’s agreement” to meet the two percent spending threshold of national GDP for defense. Yet by 2005, General James Jones, SACEUR at the time, pronounced that the “2 percent floor [was] becoming a ceiling.” The next year, at

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Williams, “Enduring, but Irrelevant? Britain, NATO and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance,” *International Politics* 50, no. 3 (2013): 382.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 379.

the 2006 meeting of defense ministers, member states again committed to meet the two percent target.⁴⁶ This benchmark first gained acceptance in the late 1970s after the United States pushed for a three percent commitment.⁴⁷ However, there is no NATO-wide mechanism to oversee or analyze how member states spend their defense-related funds. Long known as a contentious subject among security professionals and policymakers, President Trump's persistence in highlighting our allies' shortcomings, and his willingness to air the disagreements publicly, even via social media, means many more Americans are aware of it than ever before. But prior to Trump, President Barack Obama forcefully criticized European defense spending. As a case in point, a key aspect of Obama's 2012 re-election platform featured the so-called "Pivot to Asia." When questioned about the European member states' defense spending, he bluntly stated that their complacency about defense must end, and that every NATO member should contribute its full share and spend two percent on defense.⁴⁸ Four years later, during an interview with the *New York Times*, Obama characterized his support for Operation Unified Protector (OUP), NATO's intervention in Libya, a "mistake". Part of his assessment resulted from his expectation that the UK and France would bear more of the operation's burden than they eventually did, further stating that "[f]ree riders aggravate me." He expressed frustration that UK Prime Minister Cameron became distracted by other issues, while French President Nicolas Sarkozy "wanted to trumpet the flights he was taking in the air campaign, despite the fact that we had wiped out all the air defenses."⁴⁹

Beyond the two percent benchmark, NATO provides a general guideline that defense budgets should be divided into fifty percent for personnel cost, thirty percent for maintenance, and twenty percent

⁴⁶ Kathleen H. Hicks and Jeffrey Rathke, "Counting Dollars or Measuring Value: Assessing NATO and Partner Burden Sharing," *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, July 2018, 3.

⁴⁷ Jure Himelrajh, "Alliance or Neutrality: A Comparative Study in Defense" (Unpublished MMAS thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 2018), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Mark Landler, "Obama Criticizes the 'Free Riders' Among America's Allies," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2016, accessed 6 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/world/middleeast/obama-criticizes-the-free-riders-among-americas-allies.html>.

for procurements, with two percent devoted to research and development. Although this approach provides improved guidelines for NATO members, there is still no mechanism to measure the efficiency of any nation's defense infrastructure.⁵⁰ Only a handful of NATO allies devote any of their military expenditures on research and development (R&D). For example, in 2009 the United States spent \$79 billion on R&D. In contrast, France spent \$5.1 billion, the UK \$3.9 billion, and Germany \$1.5 billion during the same year—and these nations are the top spenders among European member states by a significant margin.⁵¹ The situation has only degenerated since then. In 2016, the United States spent \$78 billion on R&D (out of \$656 billion defense expenditures), France spent \$1.1 billion (\$44 billion), the UK spent \$2.3 billion (\$56 billion), and Germany spent just under \$1 billion (\$42 billion).⁵²

European Capability and Will:

The alliance's intervention in Libya superbly illustrated European NATO members' deficiencies in capability, capacity, and willingness to pull their full economic weight into the alliance. European leaders deemed OUP a victory for NATO, but in reality, it revealed several lessons underscoring the contrary. First, and most importantly, the strikes against Libya highlighted the deepening dependency of European allies on the resources of the United States. This condition, first recognized after the Balkans interventions, did not improve in the following decade. As Williams expressed, "The United Kingdom and the other NATO allies are rapidly becoming vassal states of Washington politicians, unable to act independently unless they rethink some aspects of defense reorganization and investment in the military."⁵³ While every alliance member voted affirmatively for the Libya mission, fewer than half contributed. Some nations desired to support the effort, but they could not effectively do so as they simply

⁵⁰ Himelrajh, "Alliance or Neutrality: A Comparative Study in Defense," 8.

⁵¹ Todd Sandler and Hirofumi Shimizu, "NATO Burden Sharing 1999–2010: An Altered Alliance," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10, no. 1 (2014): 48.

⁵² John F. Sargent, "Government Expenditures on Defense Research and Development by the United States and Other OECD Countries: Fact Sheet," *CRS Report* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, December 19, 2018), 1.

⁵³ Williams, "Enduring, but Irrelevant? Britain, NATO and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance," 376.

did not have the requisite capabilities. Other nations possessed the wealth and capability to shoulder more of the operation's burden, but chose not to do so. Most noticeably, only the US military possesses the necessary quality and quantity of ISR assets to allow more allies to be involved and make an impact. Advanced fighter aircraft, which most NATO nations possess, are of little use if allies cannot identify, process, and strike targets inside an integrated campaign. Even with America providing most of the ISR capability, the alliance, only eleven weeks into an operation against a weak regime in a lightly populated country, began to run critically short of munitions, requiring the United States, once more, to make up the difference.⁵⁴

Beyond the paucity of European ISR assets, NATO's command at Aviano Air Base suffered from shortages of political and legal advisors, intelligence analysts, logistics planners, linguists, and targeteers. Personnel and expertise gaps revealed by a campaign executed by fourteen nations working cooperatively might be excusable if this was the first time these nations had operated together; but these deficiencies were not new. As Ivo Daalder and Stavridis maintained, "NATO has also neglected to cultivate essential tools for military campaigns, such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, precision targeting, and aerial refueling -- despite nearly two decades of experience that have demonstrated their value."⁵⁵ This failure clearly reveals that European member states are completely comfortable with the United States picking up the bill for capabilities that are critical for warfighting, but may not inspire the general public. Consequently, European policymakers are not interested in spending money to acquire these capabilities as they know America will do so on their behalf. Therefore, despite the increases in defense spending, the funds do not purchase capabilities to make European militaries more interoperable with those of the United States, and our European allies continue relying on the United States to provide the backbone of modern military operations. Hallams and Schreer argue that OUP served to confirm NATO's trend

⁵⁴ Williams, "Enduring, but Irrelevant? Britain, NATO and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance," 377.

⁵⁵ Ivo H. Daalder and James G. Stavridis, "NATO's Victory in Libya: The Right Way to Run an Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2012, 6.

towards becoming a more fragmented alliance, with member states increasingly taking an “à la carte approach” to their alliance responsibilities. Going beyond the two-tier description, they portray the alliance as a “multi-tier NATO,” with members holding mutually antagonistic views on the alliance's strategic priorities, negatively impacting NATO operations. They binned the member states into four main groups:

“[T]hose which have the right troops and weapons and view the given mission as central to their security; those with the right means but which take part out of solidarity; those which have real military forces but choose not to take part because they disagree with the mission; and those which simply do not have many meaningful forces to contribute.”

Membership in these groups is not stagnant; member states’ classification varies depending on the operation under consideration.⁵⁶

OUP also offers exceptionally clear examples of the problem of member states’ willingness to engage in military operations. The campaign operated from twenty-nine airbases in six different countries, but only six European states actually participated in the air strikes alongside the United States and Canada. Additionally, there was no discussion, vote, or suitable joint planning within NATO before France and the UK pushed the United Nations to implement a no-fly zone. Although many allies publicly supported the operation, two – Germany and Turkey – stridently opposed it. Many that “supported” the operation did little more than send support staff or food aid. Significant national caveats again materialized. The Netherlands provided war planes with the proviso that they were only to be used for air-to-air missions, which eliminated their usefulness in this conflict. Sweden, not a NATO ally but a participant in the campaign, sent JAS-39 *Gripen* fighters on the condition that “they did not shoot or bomb anything.”⁵⁷ European leaders often publicly express aspirations of developing more autonomy from the United States. However, all evidence points to this as rhetoric purely for domestic audiences; most have no intention of creating the conditions for it to happen. To date, no serious effort has been

⁵⁶ Hallams and Schreer, “Towards a ‘Post-American’ Alliance,” 322.

⁵⁷ Williams, “Enduring, but Irrelevant? Britain, NATO and the Future of the Atlantic Alliance,” 373.

undertaken to develop a European army; it exists only in white papers. Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad assert in “Europe Alone”:

Europe cannot claim the mantle of independent global leadership and continue to rely on the United States for its security, including in its immediate neighborhood. Europe's predicament is clear. Without a common vision for defense, and with destabilizing pressures on its periphery, the continent will soon serve as a theater, rather than a participant, in a great-power competition.⁵⁸

Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution summarizes it well: “The United States alone outspends the rest of NATO by more than two to one in its military budget, despite having a GDP that is relatively comparable to the rest of the alliance in aggregate.”⁵⁹

American Options

Current NATO Framework Remains

Proponents of NATO cite numerous benefits to the United States, including: 1) peace, stability, conflict prevention, and deterrence on the European continent; 2) treaty-based defense and security support from twenty-eight allies, including some of the world’s most advanced militaries; 3) a fully functioning international military coalition that possesses operational experience; 4) access to military bases in Europe; and 5) economic stability in the world’s largest trade and investment marketplace.⁶⁰

The promotion and defense of the international liberal order has created strong transatlantic bonds: politically, economically and militarily. As of 2018, twenty-six of the twenty-nine NATO members are rated by Freedom House as “free,” the highest score of any region in the world. Two-way trade in goods and services between the United States and EUs reached about \$1.1 trillion annually in 2016, with the EU as America’s number one customer, supporting about 2.6 million US jobs.⁶¹ NATO countries produce more than fifty percent of the world’s GDP, have well over three million troops,

⁵⁸ Polyakova and Haddad, “Europe Alone,” 110.

⁵⁹ O’Hanlon, *NATO’s Limits*, 75.

⁶⁰ Belkin, *Assessing NATO’s Value*, 2.

⁶¹ Binnendijk, “Between Continuity and Erosion,” 2.

operate large combined naval fleets and air forces, and together spend over \$1 trillion annually on defense.⁶² Many experienced leaders and military professionals would agree with Winston Churchill that, “there is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.”⁶³ Lastly, the NATO alliance provides a ready-made platform that can enhance US diplomatic efforts on security issues beyond those directly related to collective defense. The United States has used its alliances as vehicles for cooperation on counterterrorism (both prior to and after 9/11) as well as for countering cybercrime, proliferation of WMD, and piracy. All of these efforts succeed only if substantial intelligence-sharing and effective law enforcement coordination mechanisms exist. And all of this coordination is enhanced when conducted through long-standing cooperative relationships.⁶⁴

NATO as Partner instead of Leader

A NATO with Europe increasing its role while the United States decreased its responsibility yet remaining a NATO member would require European member states to continue to enhance political cohesion and become more self-sufficient in defense. Whether that could happen while ensuring strong transatlantic political bonds remain in place would be problematic.⁶⁵ Although these initiatives are straightforward, none will be easy to attain, and will require significant resources to accomplish. Much progress has been made within Europe to build common goals and strengthen ties. Much work remains in the effort to align foreign policy, however, particularly regarding the Russian threat and migration from the south. As mentioned previously, much time will pass before the European member states develop a cohesive first-rate pan-European military. As Don Thieme observed, “The strategic requirement for Europe, therefore, is to convincingly show why the US still needs to be actively involved in European

⁶² Stavridis, “Why NATO Is Essential For World Peace, According to Its Former Commander.”

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Brands and Feaver, “What Are America’s Alliances Good For?”, 28.

⁶⁵ Binnendijk, “Between Continuity and Erosion,” 3.

security. NATO is and can continue to be relevant – but it needs a wide-eyed reassessment that embraces new security challenges and opportunities.”⁶⁶

Withdrawal from NATO

In the above scenario, the United States would assume a more flexible security strategy. Again, this is not a new concept. Even before the alliance was concluded, Senator Robert Taft of Ohio believed it wise for the United States to keep its options as open as possible, and proposed a policy of the “free hand.”⁶⁷ Taft’s attempt to prevent the United States from joining NATO proved to be misguided. However, with the demise of the Soviet Union, and the fact that European member states rely fully on America to provide security, the time to reconsider Taft’s proposed “free hand” policy in Europe is now at hand. Using this strategy, the United States would inform the European states that America intended to withdraw from NATO and that the Europeans would need to address security challenges to Europe on their own. This transfer should be carried out over a period of time. An immediate American withdrawal from Europe would be inefficient for the United States and tremendously unfair to our European allies (who we wish to retain as allies), as they are far from ready to operate independently. Ted Carpenter envisioned just such an eventuality:

The initial step would be to withdraw US military forces from the European theater. Within two years, the United States ought to complete the withdrawal of all ground units and reduce its naval and air forces in Europe by at least 50 percent. On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty in 2024, Washington should complete that withdrawal and give a one-year notice that it is terminating US membership in the treaty. The option of occasional deployments of US air and naval units should be kept open, based on the specifics of any agreements with the responsible European security organization or individual major powers, and Washington’s own assessment of the overall security environment. Care must be taken, though, that periodic, limited deployments do not become perpetual, large-scale “rotational” deployments that amount to a permanent US military presence in all but name.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Thieme, “NATO Renewed,” 42.

⁶⁷ Ted Galen Carpenter, “How Rigid Alliances Have Locked US into Unwanted Conflicts,” *The American Conservative*, January 22, 2018, accessed 5 January 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-rigid-alliances-have-locked-us-into-unwanted-conflicts/>.

⁶⁸ Carpenter, “Trump Should Have Already Left NATO.”

Although Carpenter's scheme is intriguing, he incorrectly believes that a successful withdrawal could be executed over such a short period; it should be conducted over several years. There is no need to abandon Europe, and the United States does bear some responsibility for allowing the European militaries to wither. It provided its partners with such a high level of insurance that they have been able to effectively outsource their defense to Washington. America would need to provide Europe time to rebuild in order to counter/deter Russia.⁶⁹

Support for US Withdrawal from NATO

America's NSS and NDS delineate China and Russia as the two revisionist powers intent on dislodging the United States as the leader of a unipolar world.⁷⁰ These documents posit that China and Russia intend to reshape the world order into one where an authoritarian regime can thrive and attain regional hegemon status. Although the NSS and NDS envision America successfully contending with both nations, not even the Trump Administration provides DoD, or the Department of State (DoS) for that matter, the resources required effectively to compete with both China *and* Russia simultaneously. However, it can realize its goals of maintaining the current liberal world order if America engages its allies and partners effectively in order for the United States to focus its resources where needed. To this end, it must leverage Europe to manage Russia while shifting resources currently allocated to Europe to the Western Hemisphere and Western Pacific, promoting free and open societies in both regions.

Europe Possesses the Ability to Defend Europe

As previously mentioned, NATO allies collectively spend less than 1.6% GDP on defense. With their high per-capita GDPs, these allies can afford to devote significantly more money to their militaries. There is currently no incentive to do so. Despite the current domestic American fight over spending

⁶⁹ Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2013): 121, accessed 29 October 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41721009>.

⁷⁰ Donald J. Trump, "The National Security Strategy of The United States" (The White House, December 2017), 25.

priorities in Washington DC, the American people continue to subsidize the security of Europe in a situation described by Barry Posen as “... welfare for the rich.”⁷¹ Given the economic growth of US allies and partners in Europe since WWII, they are now more than capable of looking after their own security needs and can be self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons. Consequently, the level of US involvement in the affairs of Europe can be reduced without incurring undue risk that regional hegemons will emerge there. The current situation discourages nations in Europe from acting more fully on their own.⁷²

The argument that Europe needs America for defense against Russia is nonsensical. The EU’s population is 447 million—*after* Brexit. Russia’s population is 143 million. The EU minus the UK has a GDP of \$18.1 trillion, Russia has an economy of \$1.7 trillion. Germany alone has a GDP of almost \$4 trillion. If Europe *needs* the United States, it is because these nations believe building an adequate military for themselves is somehow beneath them. As the Canadian blogger Ian Welsh correctly observes, “This is textbook free-riding.”⁷³ European governing elites expect the United States to come to their rescue in any crisis; they see little reason to spend on their own militaries, especially during economically difficult times. Yet the same US officials who complain about lagging European defense efforts routinely reassure those allies of America’s enduring commitment. The United States’ creation of the EDI, increasing American manpower in Eastern Europe, highlights this fact.⁷⁴ EDI originally focused on deterring Russia from invading the Baltic states, as well as assuring these states that the rest of NATO would defend them when necessary. However, EDI’s very premise highlights how NATO’s imbalance in burden-sharing led to the United States, located in another hemisphere, becoming the only nation with

⁷¹ Posen, “Pull Back,” 121.

⁷² Ronald O’Rourke and Michael Moodie, “U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress” (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2019), 17.

⁷³ Ian Welsh, “Should NATO Exist? Will It?,” *Ian Welsh*, September 20, 2019, accessed 5 January 2020, <https://www.ianwelsh.net/should-nato-exist-will-it/>.

⁷⁴ Bandow, “The Outdated Alliance?”

both the will and the capability to execute the operation. NATO's European members expect American forces will remain as long as the threat remains, cynically willing to fight Russia to the last American soldier. This effort of deterring Russia from threatening Europe should be handled by Europeans first, not left to the United States.

Returning to the Parsley Island story, the question of why should the United States be so deeply engaged in the politics of another continent should be posed. As Brookings senior fellow Thomas Wright expresses, "With serious threats and challenges to U.S. interests elsewhere in Europe and around the world, Europe must tend to its own garden. And, from a European perspective, perhaps removing the training wheels provides the continent with an opportunity to get its own act together."⁷⁵ The only way Europeans will align their spending priorities with their desire for security is for the United States to stop paying the bill. America is currently invested in NATO to a level that is beyond sustainability if we want to compete against China. Former US Navy officer Thomas Hurley describes this situation as a symptom of "American grand strategy being misaligned with the nation's financial means."⁷⁶

United States Focuses on Indo-Pacific

China is challenging the US ability to influence affairs in the Indo-Pacific (IP), and America's ability to respond is affected by its unnecessary over-extension in Europe. This situation is, at its heart, caused by a misalignment between the USG's means and the ways dedicated to achieve its desired ends. Although the number of soldiers and marines dedicated to the Middle East decreased substantially in recent years, and the number of sailors and airmen has drawn down (to a much smaller degree) as well, the American military still faces increasingly challenging regional security problems in the Western Pacific and Europe. With its defense resources forced to cover such widely disparate regions and functions, America is no longer assured of its ability to sustain a winning balance of power in the Indo-

⁷⁵ Wright, *A Post-American Europe and the Future of U.S. Strategy*, 3.

⁷⁶ Thomas F. Hurley, "NATO: Revisiting American Commitment" (Strategy Research Project, Carlisle Barracks, PA, US Army War College, 2013), 13.

Pacific theater. China, in comparison, is on track to successfully overturn the current regional order as a result of its increased ability to influence through military and economic means. Successive US presidential administrations' commitment to expanding the liberal world order, including almost two decades of nation-building and counterinsurgency wars in the Middle East, has depleted its defense resources and critically slowed advancements in its high-end military equipment. While the Pentagon refocuses on preparations for future great power wars, an outdated mindset within the Washington DC establishment continues to limit America's ability to truly assess and prioritize global commitments, and make the tough strategic choices required to prioritize the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁷ Harvard University professor Stephen Walt observes: "The available resources had shrunk, the number of opponents had grown, and still America's global agenda kept expanding"⁷⁸ According to an increasing number of voices in the national security community, the United States now faces the possibility of "strategic insolvency," in which the ends of its global strategy now exceed its means.⁷⁹

The concern is not that policy makers disagree with efforts to counter China. Quite the reverse, there is now a solid bipartisan consensus that views China as the most serious long-term threat to America's global interests, and concurs with the NDS emphasis on bolstering conventional deterrence against China and Russia. Disagreements exist over whether and how the United States should reduce other global commitments in order to focus resources on the IP. At the heart of this problem lie the decades of foreign policy inertia in Washington DC, the belief that the United States possessed such unlimited economic and military strength that made strategic trade-offs unnecessary.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone, and Matilda Steward, "Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defence in the Indo-Pacific" (Sydney, Australia: United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, August 2019), 6.

⁷⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 39.

⁷⁹ Townshend, *et al.*, "Averting Crisis," 10.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

Shifting resources from Europe to the Pacific would immediately strengthen America's hand in that theater as soon as personnel, equipment, and funds arrive. It would also provide considerable benefit in the mid- and long-term as well. While China's expanding economy over the last 20 years allowed it to focus its increasing defense resources on specific military capabilities, America devoted most of its procurement money and energy to equipment for counter insurgency and stability operations. If the United States focuses solely on China as the primary threat, DoD can target defense investments precisely to attain the greatest competitive advantage.⁸¹ The increased resources available would also facilitate the United States' ability to engage in shaping operations beyond the military arena. There would be more and better opportunities to positively influence nations in the region by magnifying our diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts. As the RAND study expressed, "ASEAN states appreciate Chinese largesse but are wary of China's growing economic influence and power in the region, especially given its geographic proximity. At the same time, they fear alienating China and thus losing Chinese trade and investment if they align more closely with the United States."⁸² If the United States can provide increased resources, closer to the "Chinese largesse", it can displace Chinese influence as these nations do not trust China and are not aligned with its values.

Competing with China's economic initiatives will not be an easy task. In 2017, Chinese President-for-life Xi Xin Ping declared that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now encompasses every region in the world, including the Arctic and Latin America. China aims to use BRI to develop strong economic ties with other countries in order to sway and shape their interests to support China's, as well as deter any criticism of China's approach or stance on sensitive matters. Additionally, President Xi recently initiated China's "21st Century Digital Silk Road" to complement BRI. This effort relies on Chinese state-owned or state-affiliated telecommunication enterprises investing or submitting bids globally in

⁸¹ Timothy M. Bonds and Michael J. Mazarr, "America's Strategy-Resource Mismatch: Addressing the Gaps Between U.S. National Strategy and Military Capacity" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 105.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 112.

areas such as 5G, fiber optic links, undersea cables, and remote sensing infrastructure connected to China's Beidou satellite navigation system. China also pursues global leadership in important industrial sectors through its state-backed investments, as outlined in its "Made in China 2025" industrial strategy and Five Year Plans. Many targeted technologies are key to the rapid technological change occurring in multiple industries. These capabilities are not only crucial to economic growth, but also to the US's ability to maintain its military advantage. DoD has not viewed every one of these activities as a concern or problem that needs to be addressed, and US policy supports the principle that sovereign countries determine their own economic interests and needs. However, DoD has stated they it is concerned that China's government has taken actions that are not aligned with international norms, negatively impact other countries' sovereignty, or undermine the security of the United States, its allies, and partners.⁸³

In addition to maintaining our strong alliances with Japan, Australia, and South Korea, we must continue and increase our recent engagement efforts with India, and ultimately bring them into the group of nations who promote a free and open IP. India is the ideal nation to check China's antagonistic behavior. With a population that will be the world's largest in the next 10 years, an economy that may pass the United States in 30 years, and an historically adversarial relationship with China, India could be the most important player in the future when it comes to maintaining cooperation, stability, and security in the region. To guide India's rise to become a regional power that respects and defends the rules-based liberal world order, the United States should engage India using a whole-of-government approach, with the DoS, DoD, and USAID heavily involved. Although India is a democracy that shares many Western values and political institutions with America and its allies, the United States-India relationship had been troubled since the latter gained its independence in 1947. Recently, however, the relationship has shown

⁸³ US Department of Defense, "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access" (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, December 20, 2018), IV.

improvement.⁸⁴ With a US- (and Japan-) friendly Prime Minister in Narendra Modi in power, the United States cannot afford to miss any opportunity to further develop bonds between the two countries.

Conclusion

Withdrawing from NATO does not mean the United States will lose interest in Europe and its affairs. Thinking of America's commitment in the world as an on/off "light switch" is intellectually lazy as there are multiple forms and levels of engagement. The United States should work strenuously to preserve transatlantic economic relationships as it benefits nations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It should also maintain extensive political and military ties, as we share many of the same values. Furthermore, the United States should work closely with either the new European defense organization or on a bilateral basis with willing nations. Finally, DoD can and should participate in combined exercises with European nations. But America should not remain Europe's security blanket/hegemon.⁸⁵ Adjusting the relationship, though it may seem daunting, should follow a template that has worked extremely well over the past several decades, namely the United States' relationship with Australia. Addressing the military relationship, DoD conducts a multitude of bilateral and multilateral exercises with Australian Defence Force (ADF), participates in combined operations when directed, and shares many exchange officers and liaison officers. Due to these factors, the DoD and ADF have proven their militaries work extremely well with one another. All of this is accomplished without an Article 5 charter or permanently basing large numbers of American servicemembers and their families in Australia. Originally signed in 1951, our collective security agreement with Australia provides each nation much more room for maneuver than does the NATO Treaty's Article 5.

President George Washington's 1797 "Farewell Address" recommends that the United States should "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world..." His address is well

⁸⁴ David Lai, John F. Troxell, and Frederick J. Gellert, "Avoiding the Trap: U.S. Strategy and Policy for Competing in the Asia-Pacific Beyond the Rebalance," Integrated Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2018), 84.

⁸⁵ Carpenter, "Trump Should Have Already Left NATO."

known and quoted frequently by those who reside in the isolationist camp. However, Washington did not end there; he later parses his use of “permanent” when he expresses that “temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies” are beneficial and good statecraft. Washington’s words provide an incisive distinction that goes beyond his discerning warning.⁸⁶ Using Washington’s guidelines, forming NATO to combat the USSR and Warsaw Pact during the Cold War was an “extraordinary emergency”. However, since the end of the Cold War, our penchant for automatically reassuring European allies that we will accept any risk and pay any price to protect them, no matter how unequal the burden, contradicts Washington’s message to us. The current policy is not wise, and it is unfair to the US taxpayer.⁸⁷ This blind support also negates America’s ability to compel the Europeans to pay their fair share. Therefore, it is time to try a different approach.⁸⁸ If the Europeans take on the core duty of defending Europe, they could spend what they want without badgering from Washington. They could then choose their own destiny, but they would also be responsible for the outcome.⁸⁹

Recommendations for Further Study

This monograph does not address a timeline for the most effective and efficient course for a United States withdrawal from NATO. Additionally, exploring the ideal organization for Europe to use as its security arrangement is beyond the scope of this paper. Nations such as Sweden, Finland, and Austria may consider the calculus sufficiently altered to make joining a broader European security organization attractive or desirable. This arrangement could be an EU defense entity with the UK and Norway as military-only members, or it could be derived from the current NATO structure excepting the United States or North America. In any case, for the first time since WWII, the United States should let Europeans determine their future in the security sphere, while remaining a friend and ally, ready to

⁸⁶ Carpenter, “How Rigid Alliances Have Locked US into Unwanted Conflicts.”

⁸⁷ Carpenter, “Trump Should Have Already Left NATO.”

⁸⁸ Hurley, “NATO: Revisiting American Commitment,” 21.

⁸⁹ Bandow, “The Outdated Alliance?”

support in times of serious need. Moreover, this monograph does not propose a scheme for the United States to compete with China and its designs to alter the current world order. One course of action that warrants further study is a revitalization of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a Cold War-era collective defense organization developed largely to combat Communism in the region. Although not considered a success, in conjunction with ASEAN a revived SEATO could provide a foundation for a new political and military organization for the region.

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