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Donald Trump questions NATO's usefulness in post-Cold War era

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The GOP has gone full Cold War, with the party's two top presidential candidates enmeshed in a heated debate over the composition of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, formed to fight the Soviet Union.

While the USSR evaporated a quarter-century ago, NATO has lurched along, taking on new roles, intervening in human rights crises, ousting autocratic leaders and assisting in the war on terror.

But GOP presidential front-runner Donald Trump challenged the alliance's usefulness, sparking what analysts said is a broader debate over the U.S. role in the world.

"I don't mind NATO per se, but it has to be reconstituted, it has to be modernized," Mr. Trump said Monday on "Fox and Friends." "You know, we're dealing with NATO from the days of the Soviet Union, which no longer exists. We need to either transition into terror or we need something else, because we have to get countries together."

In the wake of last week's deadly terrorist attacks in Brussels that left about three dozen dead and dozens of others wounded, analysts said the timing of Mr. Trump's questioning the organization's relevance was a bit odd.

"It's a little strange that Trump has been so over-the-top about its relevance as nonexistent," said Gary Schmitt, co-director of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. "I think the strange thing is with the rise of Putinism, you would think NATO's relevance would be important."

The 28-member alliance of North American and European countries, originally signed in 1949, emerged as a major bulwark against the old Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Mr. Trump has pointed out that he was simply answering a question about NATO, which came during a Washington Post editorial board meeting the day before the Brussels attacks and ended up helping precipitate the current debate. He hasn't backed down from his position in subsequent interviews, however, and says that after a few days of criticism, people are now agreeing with him.

But Sen. Ted Cruz, Mr. Trump's top rival in the 2016 GOP race, has said Mr. Trump's comments betray his lack of foreign policy knowledge.

"Abandoning Europe, withdrawing from the most successful military alliance of modern times makes no sense at all," Mr. Cruz said on "Fox News Sunday." "If Donald were president [and] he actually did what he said he would do, withdraw from NATO, it would hand a massive victory to Putin, a massive victory to [the Islamic State]. ISIS would be dancing in the street at the weakness and isolationism of Donald Trump."

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, the third remaining GOP candidate, appeared open to a discussion on rethinking the role of the alliance, using an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" this week to call for a "dramatically reformed NATO."

"Right now we think of NATO as a military organization," Mr. Kasich said. "I think it needs to involve itself in policing and in intelligence gathering because, when we look at Europe right now, we find there's so many holes and an inability of — their ability to get their act together."

Terrorism intelligence and information-sharing between NATO countries has come into sharp focus in the wake of the attacks in Brussels. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last week that Belgian authorities ignored a warning about suspected suicide bomber Ibrahim El Bakraoui, who had been deported from Turkey last year.

Emma Ashford, a visiting research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said it was "a bit unexpected" that Mr. Trump started talking about NATO.

But, she said, it feeds into one of his overarching themes of dividing everything into wins and losses. Mr. Trump talks frequently about how the United States consistently loses to other countries on the world stage on issues ranging from trade to war.

Both parties, she said, had generally been in recent agreement about the outside role the United States plays in the alliance.

"All of that had gone effectively unchallenged," she said.

Mr. Trump has also argued the United States puts too much of its own money into NATO.

"We're paying the lion's share," he said Monday. "We're spending tremendous amounts of money on something that was many, many decades ago, and the world has changed. It's a different place."

The United States is on the hook for about 22 percent of common-funded budgets and programs for NATO in 2016 and 2017, according to the organization. That's the highest share of any individual country, with Germany in second at about 15 percent and France in third at about 11 percent.

The civil budget for 2016 is 222 million Euros, or about \$249 million, and the military budget is 1.16 billion Euros, or about \$1.3 billion.

But Mr. Trump's critics, like Mr. Cruz, have labeled the businessman's foreign policy worldview an isolationist one. Throughout the campaign Mr. Trump has also cited the high financial costs of President George W. Bush's military adventurism in the Middle East — questioning the interventionist stance that's typically united much of the Republican Party for the past 15 years or so.

He's also threatened to slap tariffs on countries like Mexico and China, and has extensively criticized free trade agreements that he says have hurt American workers.

Mr. Trump said Monday his motto is aptly summed up as "America first."

"You're right, my policy is America first," he said. "And it'll always be America first."

Ms. Ashford did say he's getting it partly right on the argument that the United States has assumed broad expectations that the country will step in to defend others around the world.

"It's something we should be having a debate about," she said.

But she also said Mr. Trump's foreign policy stances are "wildly inconsistent," and that he hasn't really done an effective job of outlining specific prescriptions for his diagnoses.

Mr. Schmitt said that, in a roundabout way, the NATO discussion could end up being a good thing even though he thinks Mr. Trump is wrongheaded on it, as it could force people to make cogent arguments about why the organization is still relevant.

"It's a wake-up call," even if it's a wrong one, he said.