

By ignoring the lessons of history, Nato is making the world less safe

Sholto Byrnes

May 2, 2017

a time when tension on the Korean Peninsula is higher than it has been for decades, with US president Donald Trump openly musing over whether the North's leader, Kim Jongun, is rational or not, what should be a priority for Nato? The western military alliance may not count South Korea as a member, but it is one of Nato's "partners across the globe". South Korea has contributed to Nato capacitybuilding in Afghanistan, and the group has also taken a strong line on the North's "provocative rhetoric and actions".

There is little doubt that any conflagration would swiftly draw in Nato, and so one might have thought that this particular flash point would be its main focus at the moment.

Not so. This, apparently, has been the appropriate time to seal the accession of yet another new member. Step forward Montenegro, whose parliament has just ratified the joining treaty. With a standing army of 2,000, and a total population of 620,000, one wonders just what are the "many different ways" in which Montenegro is contributing "to our shared security", as Nato's general secretary Jens Stoltenberg put it in a press conference in January. The move may not appear to be significant – except for the fact that Montenegro joining Nato is like waving a red flag in front of Vladimir Putin's face. It also suggests that after hoovering up most 5/3/2017 By ignoring the lessons of history, Nato is making the world less safe | The National

<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/byignoringthelessonsofhistorynatoismakingtheworldlessafe> 2/6 of the excommunist countries of Eastern Europe, the treaty organisation's desire to add still more new members from what Russia considers to be its historical sphere of influence, such as Georgia and Ukraine, is not exhausted. At a time of such global instability and uncertainty, one should question if that is wise.

Definitely not, I would say; and especially since Russian cooperation is vital in solving so many conflicts, most notably that in Syria. Far from continuing to expand, Nato ought to be examining what its actual purpose is today. Its original mandate, to hold the line against the Eastern Bloc, expired with the end of the Cold War. What is it now? In his January press conference, Mr Stoltenberg talked of "our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace ... a unique family of nations, based on shared values".

The idea of "shared values" is highly questionable, given that Nato now ranges from the old liberal democracies to countries in which varying forms of conservative, illiberal populism are flourishing, such as Hungary, Turkey and Poland. As many American critics have pointed out: shouldn't building such a "family of nations" in Europe be the European Union's job, not Nato's? And while they're at it, shouldn't they start paying properly for their own military protection – instead of falling far short, on average, of the 2 per cent of GDP they have agreed to spend on defence?

As the Cato Institute scholar Doug Bandow put it: "The Europeans enjoy around eight times the total GDP, devote more than three times as much to military spending, and have about three times the population of Russia. Yet they are running scared, demanding that America, with a smaller economy and population, defend them. The Kremlin probably resounds with laughter over how its smallest manoeuvre sets off renewed European pleading for bases, deployments and reassurances from Washington."

Rand Paul, the US senator, was even more blunt, addressing the matter this February.

He wrote that the other Nato countries "have largely hitched a ride to the US train that subsidises their defences and allows them to direct their revenues to domestic pursuits". He also ridiculed the necessity of countering a Russian "threat" that has been hugely overhyped.

"Those who want to allow Montenegro into Nato believe that unless the whole world joins Nato, Russia will conquer the world. The truth is, as always, more complicated."

He might have added that the perceived encircling of Russia by Nato is one of the factors that stirred Mr Putin – a man who entered office with little apparent rancour towards the alliance – to turn more bellicose, incensed, as were many other Russians, by what appeared to be the belittling of a country that still saw itself as a great power.

The chaos in and partial dismemberment of Ukraine may also have been avoided. For if Russia and Ukraine were both members of Nato, Viktor Yanukovich would have had to have been removed by constitutional means, not by a westernsupported illegal coup (which it was, however unpopular and corrupt the expresident may have been); the supremacy of the ballot box would have been confirmed, as would the precept that reform must take place via legitimate means, rather than mob rule.

Like the EU, Nato has overextended itself and lost the moorings of a core purpose all its members can truly unite around. Instead of keeping the peace it has unnecessarily raised the stakes with Russia. This latest expansion is a sign, however, that it has not learnt any lessons from past mistakes. In doing so it makes all its members, and the rest of the world, that little bit less safe.