



Trump Lectures NATO: A Burden-Sharing Quest on Steroids

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US President Donald Trump was blunt and demanding in his speech to the NATO summit in Brussels. Indeed, much of the rhetoric was reminiscent of his statements during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, when he termed NATO “obsolete,” and indicated that the U.S. security commitment to certain allies — especially the vulnerable Baltic republics — might be conditional.

At the time, both NATO partisans and advocates of reassessing the Alliance believed that Trump might be articulating a new, much more restrained, U.S grand strategy. His critical comments on other occasions regarding Washington’s East Asian allies and its security partners in the Middle East, most notably Saudi Arabia, reinforced that impression. NATO loyalists viewed the possibility with horror, while proponents of a new strategy of realism and restraint did so with cautious hope.

Both factions misread the meaning of his comments. Although Trump sometimes hinted that he might reconsider the entire rationale for Washington’s alliance network, that was never the thrust of his argument. In his most definitive foreign policy speech during the campaign, the real nuance should have become apparent. “Our allies are not paying their fair share” of the collective-defense effort, Trump insisted. “The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves.” But he went on to stress that “the whole world will be safer if the allies do their part to support our common defense and security.” In other words, he was not eager to repudiate NATO or other alliances and have the United States go its own way. He was simply insistent on greater burden-sharing by the allies.

That position was hardly unique to Trump. U.S. officials have begged and hectored the European allies for decades to do more for transatlantic defense. One of the earliest examples was the warning by John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower’s secretary of state, that the United States might have to conduct an “agonizing reappraisal” of its defense commitment to Europe, if the other NATO members did not make a more serious effort. President Barack Obama’s secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, admonished the Europeans during a February 2014 meeting of NATO defense ministers, saying that their existing path of inadequate defense spending, “is not sustainable. Our alliance can endure only as long as we are willing to fight for it, and invest in it.” Rebalancing NATO’s “burden-sharing and capabilities,” Hagel stressed “is mandatory — not

elective.” There were numerous statements of a similar nature from various U.S. officials in the intervening years.

NATO’s European members routinely dismissed such warnings, and they did so for a very basic reason. Alan Tonelson, a former associate editor with Foreign Policy, aptly identified the inherent futility of Washington’s burden-sharing approach. “U.S. leaders never gave the Europeans sufficient incentive to assume greater relative military responsibilities. The incentive was lacking, in turn, because Washington never believed it could afford to walk away from NATO or even reduce its role, if the allies stood firm. Worse, U.S. leaders repeatedly telegraphed that message to the Europeans—often in the midst of burden-sharing controversies.”

The Trump administration has made the same blunder. Both Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Defense James Mattis muddled their burden-sharing message at the February Munich security conference by simultaneously stressing the alliance’s critical importance to the United States and Washington’s undying devotion to transatlantic solidarity. Trump himself did so early in his presidency when he made a joint statement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel that, contrary to his earlier comment that NATO was “obsolete,” he believed that the Alliance was of “fundamental importance.” He has since backed away even more from his characterization of the alliance as obsolete.

When U.S. leaders take the position that Europe’s security means as much (or more) to the United States than it does to the Europeans, it’s hardly surprising that the other NATO members repeatedly brush-off Washington’s demands for greater burden-sharing. Thus, as Trump pointed out in his Brussels’ speech only five Alliance members (including the United States) have fulfilled the pledge adopted following the 2006 NATO summit, and reiterated at subsequent sessions, to spend at least two percent of their annual GDP on defense.

The reality is that Trump was right the first time; NATO is obsolete, and the arrangement no longer serves the best interests of either the United States or its European allies. Washington’s commitment to NATO was made at a time when the European democracies were weak and war-ravaged. They also faced a totalitarian military superpower with unclear, but ominous, ambitions. That situation bears no resemblance to today’s reality. The European Union collectively has a population and an economy larger than America’s. Moreover, the main threat in Europe comes from Russia, a declining, conventional regional power with an economy barely larger than that of Spain. The nations of the European Union can and should take primary responsibility for the security of Europe and not rely so heavily on the United States for defense.

Moreover, Washington’s demands for greater burden-sharing increasingly focus on objectives outside the European theater. Trump made that point very clear in his Brussels speech, insisting that the NATO allies make a greater contribution to the war against terror. Indeed, the president had stated earlier that the main reason he had considered NATO obsolete was the failure of the Alliance to do more in that conflict.

But European leaders and their publics need to ask whether signing on to Washington’s ill-advised crusades in the Middle East and Afghanistan is really in their best interests. Some NATO members, including tiny Estonia, have sent token forces into Afghanistan for years in the

expectation that such contributions would strengthen the U.S. resolve to protect Estonia from the main threat it fears: an aggressive Russia. But entanglement in Washington's wars is a very high price to pay for all of the European allies.

A major reason why Islamic radicals have attacked targets in Europe is not because of a visceral hatred of Western political and cultural values—although there is some of that. The main grievance is the involvement of those countries in U.S.-led wars in the Muslim world. The perpetrators of the attack on the Bataclan concert hall in Paris in December 2015 did not shout out: “This is because you let women drive!” Instead, they shouted: “This is for Syria!” France (along with the United States and other Western allies) had been bombing areas controlled by ISIS in Syria for more than a year. The Paris attacks were bloody payback—as have been subsequent incidents in multiple NATO countries.

If increasing their exposure to America's wars in the Middle East and Central Asia is now a crucial requirement of burden-sharing, the Europeans would be wise to opt-out. That step might or might not cause the Trump administration to reconsider the rationale for Washington's commitment to NATO. But as Washington pushes the Alliance to adopt an increased focus outside of Europe, the allies would make a major blunder to follow Washington's lead.

NATO is no longer a good bargain for either side. Financially, it certainly is a bad deal for American taxpayers, and it needlessly increases America's risk exposure to defend small security clients in what might well be parochial quarrels with Russia. Conversely, the Alliance is dragging the European members into foolish U.S. regime-change and nation-building crusades in the Middle East and Central Asia. An amicable strategic divorce would be best for both sides.

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