



Trump's NATO criticism wins positive reviews

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Donald Trump's criticisms of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are winning positive attention from analysts who argue the military alliance should be getting more scrutiny from Washington.

"When Trump talks about NATO being obsolete, it is dismissed as crazy rhetoric," said Job Henning, a defense analyst who recently wrote a piece advocating for broad reform of the alliance. "But he is actually asking questions that are pretty similar to what a lot of people have been asking.

Trump made headlines over the weekend by questioning NATO's relevance and arguing its members aren't paying their fair share. The comments came just before NATO officials arrived in Washington for meetings with President Obama and the Pentagon.

"Either they pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO," Trump said Saturday in an interview with The Washington Post.

The Trump comments were aimed at NATO members who have repeatedly failed to meet the target of spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense. Only five of the 28 members — the U.S., the United Kingdom, Greece, Estonia and Poland — now meet the standard.

Plenty of people beyond Trump see a problem with those figures.

“I think that we would be in better position, frankly, if the Europeans were better situated, better prepared, to deal with security challenges in their neighborhood,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

The NATO comments from Trump came as he took heat for other positions he’s taken on foreign affairs, including suggestions that he could use nuclear weapons in a Middle East war and that the United States should withdraw troops from Japan and South Korea and let those countries defend themselves from North Korea.

Ted Cruz’s presidential campaign zeroed in on Trump’s criticisms of NATO on Tuesday, arguing they showed he was unfit to lead the country.

“Three decades ago, President Ronald Reagan worked to preserve and strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from concerted external subversion and internal discord,” Frank Gaffney, a foreign policy adviser to Cruz, wrote Tuesday of Trump’s remarks.

“Today, the Free World’s most important alliance is once again under assault. Vladimir Putin’s Russia has attacked Ukraine and threatened nuclear attacks on NATO members. And critics — notably, Donald Trump — are once again challenging not just the alliance’s burden-sharing, but the wisdom of its continued existence,” he wrote.

NATO was drawn up at the dawn of the Cold War and after the devastation of World War II.

The U.S. saw economic benefit in Europe as a potential trading partner and encouraged Europeans to focus on economic and political reconstruction at home and to not divert resources to military expenditures.

By the early 1990s, Europe was economically and politically reformed, but the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations strongly discouraged an independent European security alliance. As a result, European countries chose not to invest heavily in their defenses and cut military spending.

“I think the basic arrangement where the United State effectively discourages European countries from defending themselves and their interests — that needs to be revisited,” Preble said.

Defense experts also agree that NATO has become more obsolete, in terms of its inability to deter Russian aggression or pre-empting the Syrian war or its spillover effects in Europe.

“NATO hasn’t been updated to serve our interests in the current security environment. It didn’t provide a stable security architecture that could have helped us avoid what happened with Ukraine, and with Syria,” said Henning.

Nor has NATO performed well in military campaigns, added Preble.

“I think NATO’s performance in the Libyan war in 2011 was abysmal, frankly. And I think not quite as bad, but still worrisome, is NATO’s performance in Afghanistan or in an earlier period in the Balkans in the late 1990s,” he said.

Trump has also called for NATO to be more focused on counterterrorism, which defense experts say is happening in Europe anyway independently of NATO. However, they say the alliance could focus more on asymmetric threats.

“NATO is in the process of transforming itself, so for Trump to say it needs to change, well, he’s just agreeing with what everybody else has already been working on — he’s coming late to the party,” said Jorge Benitez, director of NATOSource and senior fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security.

Preble emphasized that he is not a Trump supporter, and that NATO scholars have been making similar comments for decades.

However, he said, “to me, this is a case of a blind squirrel finds a nut from time to time.”

Others credit Trump with invigorating the discussion.

“In watching the debates on both sides, I haven’t really seen the new world debated and how we’re going to approach the new world and what that means for defense,” said John Bonsell, vice president for government affairs at SAIC and a former senior GOP aide on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

“The fact that he even mentioned NATO was sort of new. I mean, I haven’t seen it debated; nobody else is talking about it that I saw, right? So if this spurs a debate, I’m happy,” said Bonsell, a retired Army colonel.