



Trump, Nato, And Establishment Hysteria

Benjamin Friedman and Joshua Shiffrinson

June 16, 2017

Now that the dust has settled on President Donald Trump's first foreign trip, we can assess the damage. The conventional hysteria notwithstanding, Trump's rudeness towards NATO allies did not reveal his intention to abandon them and end U.S. global leadership. It's actually worse than that, at least from our perspective. Trump is alienating allies *without* reducing U.S. defense commitments to them. He isn't surrendering U.S. leadership so much as defiling it.

You probably don't need us to remind you that the president's trip last month began as a carnival of Arabian pomp, hostility towards Iran, praise for autocracy, geographic ignorance, and meme-ready awkwardness. Then things took a darker turn in Brussels. Attending a meeting of the heads of NATO states, Trump welcomed Montenegro to NATO by shoving aside its prime minister to get center stage for a photograph, hectored allies to spend more, and defied expectations — even his advisors — by refusing to endorse Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty, which calls for collective defense. It went worse behind the scenes, we now know. Trump again tried to go around the European Union to win trade concessions from Germany and mentioned getting “back-pay” from NATO allies. At the subsequent G-7 meeting, the president fended off requests to keep the United States in the Paris Climate Accord and pulled out shortly after returning home.

Besides global derision and U.S. embarrassment, Trump's actions produced immediate political results. For the allied leaders, already considerable domestic rewards for opposing Trump grew. The new French president, Emmanuel Macron, reveling in his “I' anti-Trump” nickname, quickly took to tweaking his U.S. counterpart. Canada's foreign minister argued that given U.S. doubt about the “worth of its mantle of global leadership,” Canadians had to set their own course and spend more on defense.

In Germany, Angela Merkel's main rival for the chancellorship, Social Democrat Martin Schulz, seemed to get a polling boost for his habit of criticizing Trump and bashed him for trying to “inflict humiliation in Brussels” and his “unacceptable” treatment of Merkel. The chancellor herself offered a reflection at a campaign rally:

The times when we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over ... I experienced that in the last a few days, and therefore I can only say that we Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands.

The Trump administration, meanwhile, tried damage control. The national security advisor and chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors authored an op-ed insisting that the president had

essentially backed Article 5. Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis assured allies that the United States was still there for them. Trump, presumably having succumbed to pressure from his aides, finally endorsed Article 5 last Friday.

These efforts failed to calm establishment foreign policy thinkers, who generally see Trump's alliance see-sawing as indicative of isolationist proclivities and his damage to global U.S. leadership as permanent. After Merkel's comment, Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass tweeted that by provoking Europe to rely on itself for its defense, Trump had allowed what U.S. policy had labored to avoid since World War II. When Trump backed Article 5, Haass tweeted that even welcome policy reversals "come at cost to U.S. credibility & reputation for reliability." Steve Pifer of Brookings wrote that Trump is "undoing" U.S. engagement in Europe that maintains "peace and stability." *The New York Times* editorial board declared that "the United States is no longer the reliable partner her country and the rest of Europe have long depended on." By last week it was obvious to Heather Hurlburt of New America that "President Trump and his enablers are ushering us into a new, post-American stage of global relations."

Churlish as Trump's conduct in Europe was, these reactions are overwrought and unmoored from history. For better or worse, the Trump administration is not renouncing the U.S. defense commitment to Europe or leadership more generally. Should uncertainty about that nonetheless drive European states rely less on the United States, Washington will still have moved towards an old and sensible policy goal of letting an independent Europe lead its own defenses.

With all of the wailing and rending of garments among the Washington foreign policy establishment, it is easy to miss that neither the United States nor its NATO allies have made big defense policy changes since Trump took office. Merkel's electorally-driven comment essentially repeated what she said in January in response to Trump's election and the Brexit. She seemed to endorse further integration of common E.U. defense policies — an old objective. If there's new policy here, it's more support for an E.U. defense procurement fund and something called "Permanent Structured Cooperation," which vaguely promises to coordinate security cooperation among groups of E.U. states — significant but hardly revolutionary developments in Europe's fitful path towards a common defense.

U.S. military policy in Europe has changed even less. Trump is not removing any of the 80,000 troops on the continent or even curtailing recent rotations of U.S. forces to Eastern Europe. Even Trump's reluctance on Article 5 has a basis in the NATO treaty. At the behest of U.S. negotiators eager to preserve options, the signatories promise only "such action as it deems necessary" in the face of an attack on another NATO member.

Pressing European allies to spend more on defense is hardly new, even if Trump's boorish way of asking is. The Pentagon long ago published an annual report to scold allies on spending. U.S. leaders, including President Barack Obama, have regularly beseeched the allies to spend more, and the allies continually say they will. Non-U.S. NATO spending did increase mildly in real terms from 2015 to 2016, partly thanks to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

European anxiety about losing U.S. protection is also familiar. During the 1940s and 1950s, European NATO members worried that the United States would abandon them either because of the vicissitudes of American politics or the desire to avoid the costs of stopping a Soviet invasion. Later, U.S.-Soviet arms control and détente stoked similar European worries.

These patterns reflect structural dilemmas of postwar U.S. policy in Europe. Reassuring allies tends to encourage them to spend less on defense while harming U.S.-Russian — and, before that, Soviet — relations. Repairing those relations alienates at least some allies, but can frighten them into heavier spending. The goal of reassuring allies competes with those of squeezing them to spend and reducing tension with Russia. Trump's Russia tilt rebalances concerns, but they reflect an old problem.

Even if it turns out Trump has set off a process leading to unprecedented European military independence, the United States will not have jettisoned a holy and continuous postwar goal. U.S. leaders did not craft a postwar order with the idea of forever serving as its center. Different leaders had different agendas, of course, but in general American strategy during and after World War II was expressly designed to allow the United States to come home from Europe. In the first two decades of the Cold War, the United States worked to rebuild Germany within Western Europe, so that allied states could stand against the Soviet Union without requiring the United States to man the front line. The Eisenhower administration supported the development of a European Army within the European Defense Community — outside NATO, that is. This effort failed, but it was due more to the reluctance of the West Europeans to cooperate with each another than want of U.S. effort.

U.S. thinking on NATO shifted during and after the Cold War. Over time, a new consensus developed that U.S. domination of Europe was desirable. NATO served that purpose, and European military integration independent of the United States was no longer as desirable. Given allied sensibilities and the difficulty of selling the U.S. public on such a contestable rationale, this logic was rarely stated officially. Still this is what drives the broad consternation provoked by Merkel's comment. But to the extent that Germany works within Europe to organize a defensive posture not reliant on U.S. forces, it reflects the *success* of America's postwar vision for an independent European defense.

Our purpose here isn't to defend Trump, but rather policies he might sully. Were Trump diplomatically reducing U.S. defense commitments to Europe, he'd deserve credit for allowing possible military cuts and even for aiding the European Union's development as a real power. Instead, he's *not* reducing U.S. commitments while trying to bully allies into boosting defense spending. By antagonizing allies without reducing U.S. commitments to them, he's just making U.S. leadership costlier.

There is plenty wrong with Trump's foreign policy, but abandoning European allies is not among his sins. Were his rudeness to allies to nonetheless produce heightened European military capability that might lessen the U.S. military's burdens, we'll have realized a venerable, if neglected, U.S. foreign policy goal. It shouldn't be condemned by association with this president.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a Research Fellow in Defense Homeland Security Studies at the Cato Institute.