

POLICY BRIEF – June 2, 2017
NATO Hangs in the Balance

By Basel Ammane

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency given the fiery rhetoric he engaged in and the bold positions he staked out, sent shock waves around the world that engulfed America's allies, including ones it is bound by treaty to defend. The countries of NATO felt the pressure as he insinuated that countries that did not fulfill their obligation to devote two percent of their GDP to defence could not count on the US defending them¹, and declared the alliance to be "obsolete and expensive" during the campaign.² However, there was confusion and partial relief as Trump appeared to reverse his position when he declared that NATO was "no longer obsolete" since he was assured by the Alliance's secretary general and other leaders that fighting terrorism would be a priority. His declarations were made despite the fact that NATO has long been involved in fighting terrorism, whether in deploying troops to Afghanistan as a response to the 9/11 attacks, or the considerable sharing of intelligence that is facilitated by it.³ The NATO meeting on the 25th of May was the first important opportunity for the president to meet with fellow members' heads of state and clarify where he stood in terms of the vision he had for the alliance as well as honouring his country's commitments. In articulating his vision for the Alliance, Trump was vociferous in expressing his demands for an increase in members' defence spending and the alliance's involvement in counterterrorism and immigration, but rather quiet when it came to explicitly reaffirming a verbal commitment to collective defence.⁴

In attempting to offer an explanation for the remarkable endurance of NATO as compared

¹<https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/07/trump-nato/492341/>

²http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/27/trump_europe_is_not_safe_lots_of_the_free_world_has_become_weak.html

to alliances in times past, Wallace Thies argued that three factors that were present in the environment in which it was created, but were absent in the milieu from which previous alliances emerged, explain this continuity. These are: the bipolarity that characterized the international system, in contrast to the multipolarity that dominated it prior to the Cold War; the power difference between United States, on the one hand, and its allies on the other; the ideological differences between liberal democracies and communist countries that made it harder to engage in the discarding of allies that was common in other eras; and the healing qualities afforded to the alliance by virtue of the fact that all its states were liberal democracies that sought one another's approval, were inclined to resolve their differences through dialogue, and were characterized by a diffusion of power that undergirded their propensity for compromise in policy making.⁵

Many, but not all, of these factors continue to hold. First, the United States remains the most powerful among its allies militarily and economically, and thus acts as the nucleus of the alliance around which the other member states revolve. Second, by and large, the countries that make up the alliance retain their commitment to democratic procedures of decision-making within them and to dialogue amongst themselves. This played a significant role in helping the alliance survive the numerous crises that afflicted it since its inception, and will likely continue to do so into the future. Having said this, the bipolarity that was reflected in the Cold-War-era international order has significantly diminished, and the ideological divide that characterized that period has abated.

The bridging of the ideological chasm that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War has been driven by changes that took place in both countries. In

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/12/politics/donald-trump-jens-stoltenberg-nato/>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40037776>

⁵ Thies, W. J. (2009). *Why NATO endures*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Russia, the Kremlin has articulated a civic and inclusive version of nationalism entitled ‘imperial nationalism.’ This type of nationalism centres around the idea that Russia “represents a Europe different from the one supposedly dominated by America-led liberalism.” Belief in this ideology was reflected in disproportionately high support for statements that conceived of Russia as its own civilization that is distinct from European civilization, or as a mixture of Asian and European civilizations. This has been accompanied by meagre backing for the expansion of Russia. Most importantly, however, the state has demonstrated an interest in reviving the stature of pre-1917 Russian history, diminishing that of the seventy years under communism.⁶ In his speeches and at conferences, Putin contrasted a traditionalist, morally confident Russia with an “infertile and genderless” West that was gravitating toward “chaotic darkness” and a “return to a primitive state” due to an excessive embrace of moral relativism.⁷

The impact of his rhetoric was not limited to Russia; it resulted in important political shifts in Europe and the United States. In Europe, many countries witnessed the rise of numerous far-right political parties that preached a version of populism that was similarly scathing in its criticism of the liberal democratic establishment. These parties made significant inroads in the electorate, but were not successful in seizing power. In the US, on the other hand, the eccentric candidate, Donald Trump, who preached a version of populism that is isolationist, conceives of the value of alliances through a transactional prism, and is lukewarm at best in terms of its support for political liberalism won the election and seized power. This could not have happened without American conservative thinkers’ embrace of his nationalist rhetoric which exhibited a remarkable

level of similarity to Putin’s in terms of its denouncement of cosmopolitanism. A corollary of this has been the significant shift in the attitudes of American Republicans towards a more favourable view of Putin, and naturally, a rapprochement with Russia.⁸

While Cold War global military competition that characterized that era has given way to American hegemony, Russia still constitutes a competitive state in the international system, particularly in military terms. It has not shied away from asserting itself in many areas, while flouting some international agreements with the United States. Moreover, it annexed territory from Ukraine and Georgia, and provided support for anti-European and anti-American political parties. Its recent actions in European and American elections have demonstrated its strong cyber and information warfare capabilities.⁹ The deterioration of cooperation on the nuclear disarmament front during Obama’s tenure will likely increase the role of deterrence between the two countries. All of this points to the emergence of a different type of competition between the two states, one that is primarily concerned with power and not characterized by a desire to spread an ideology across the globe.

Given the decline in the salience of two of the factors which sustained NATO for seventy years, it is not a stretch to say that the alliance is in a crisis in a way that is different from other previous crises. After the end of the Cold war, the alliance managed to find a rationale for its continued existence and expansion. It evolved in its self-conception from a traditional military alliance to a security community that also bore the characteristics of a political community that was bound by adherence to common values, chiefly democracy and the rule of law. But with waning

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/>

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/its-putins-world/513848/>

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/its-putins-world/513848/>

⁹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-nato-problem-weve-forgotten-why-were-member>

American commitment for the security of members most at risk of experiencing Russian aggression, a test of NATO solidarity by Russia that ultimately goes unanswered could spell the end of the alliance.

Having said all this, there is still reason to believe that NATO could survive this crisis. Prior to Trump's assumption of the presidency, President Obama had taken multiple measures aimed at reassuring allies in Europe. These include the European Reassurance Initiative which entailed military exercises as well as greater deployment of troops and military equipment, and the Readiness Action plan which enhanced the alliance's ability to handle challenges on its eastern and southern flanks.¹⁰ Furthermore, European countries began talk of boosting their military spending and streamlining their defence structures before Trump's inauguration.¹¹ In fact, there is already evidence of armed forces integration taking place. Two brigades, one from Romania and the other from the Czech Republic, have been integrated in the German armed forces.¹²

Whether NATO survives the Trump presidency will ultimately depend on the policies that his administration enacts, and the Europeans' reaction to his rhetoric and said policies. One thing is certain, though. Trump places an importance on NATO playing a more robust role on combating terrorism shouldering less of the burden. If NATO can make the necessary changes in time, it might be able to secure the American president's blessing.

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¹⁰ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-06-13/natos-next-act>

¹¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-15/europe-s-defense-spending-to-rise-as-global-threats-proliferate>

¹² <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/22/germany-is-quietly-building-a-european-army-under-its-command/>