

# NATO AT 70: HOW TRUMP HAS STRENGTHENED THE ALLIANCE

*Donald Trump has been an outspoken critic of NATO – insulting allies for spending too little on defense, questioning its eastward expansion, and even threatening to withdraw from the Alliance altogether. Despite Trump’s dismissive attitude toward NATO, the Alliance is in notably good shape at its 70th anniversary. It has succeeded in adapting to shifting geopolitical conditions, addressing new threats in the broader Middle East while at the same time bolstering deterrence and collective defense against Russia. Paradoxically, Trump’s criticism of NATO has actually strengthened the Alliance by eliciting strong support for it on both sides of the Atlantic and encouraging an increase in member’s defense investments.*

Charles A. Kupchan\*



TURKISH POLICY  
QUARTERLY

Summer 2019

\* Charles A. Kupchan is a Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. An earlier version of this article originally appeared in Foreign Affairs.

**N**ATO's foreign ministers gathered in Washington, D.C. in April 2019 to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Alliance. The festivities hardly masked the profound anxiety about NATO's future felt on both sides of the Atlantic – including in Turkey. Donald Trump is, of course, the leading cause of the disquiet. Although he generally held his fire during the anniversary celebration, he again went after Germany for spending too little on defense. That being said, Trump's frustration with the reluctance of Germany and other allies to increase defense spending is justified. However, his insulting attitude toward allies, his public ambiguity about whether the United States will stand by its commitment to collective defense, and his reported desire to withdraw the United States from the Alliance have raised fears that 2019 will be a year for eulogizing NATO rather than feting it.

Trump's diatribes are not the only cause of the unease. A broadening chorus of realist strategists claims that the United States is overdue for a major strategic retrenchment, and that it is past time for Europe to tend its own garden. Even staunch defenders of NATO express doubts about its future. Some worry that growing US preoccupations in East Asia will lure the United States away from its Atlantic calling and could trigger transatlantic tensions over how to deal with the rise of China. Others fear that democratic backsliding among members is compromising the Alliance's values-based solidarity. Close NATO watchers are concerned that EU efforts to more deeply integrate European foreign and defense policies could ultimately weaken the Atlantic link. Additionally, debate rages on both sides of the Atlantic as to whether NATO enlargement has enhanced or eroded European stability and whether expansion should be continued despite the costs to the West's relationship with Russia.

These worries are unwarranted: NATO at 70 is actually in remarkably good shape. Yes, European allies have been laggards on defense spending, and some members—Hungary, Poland, and Turkey in particular—have tarnished democratic credentials. But NATO has demonstrated an impressive ability to adapt to the changing geopolitical environment since the Cold War's end, ensuring that the United States and Europe remain each other's go-to partners. The Alliance opened its doors to the new democracies that emerged from the former Soviet bloc, helping to anchor security and democracy in a wider Europe. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, members have taken important steps to strengthen deterrence against the Kremlin's adventurism. NATO has struck partnerships across the globe and carried out ambitious missions well beyond the territory of member states—most notably in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya. All the while, the Alliance has retooled to address new hazards such as cyber threats, terrorism, hybrid warfare, and migration.

Precisely because NATO has been so nimble and effective, it enjoys strong political support on both sides of the Atlantic, leaving Trump virtually alone as a vociferous critic.

Moreover—and paradoxically—Trump’s withering attacks on the Alliance are actually strengthening NATO. Defenders of the Alliance are coming out of the woodwork, especially in the US Congress. Trump’s regular haranguing of allies for insufficient defense spending is paying off: Europeans are finally investing more in their militaries, making it only more likely that the United States will cleave to Europe as its partner of choice. And Trump’s skepticism toward NATO expansion could help resolve the continuing controversy over enlargement, guiding allies to the sensible conclusion that it is time for the Alliance to begin closing its open door.

---

*“NATO has been so nimble and effective, it enjoys strong political support on both sides of the Atlantic, leaving Trump virtually alone as a vociferous critic.”*

---

### *A Valuable Alliance*

NATO is entering its eighth decade in quite good health because it succeeds admirably in advancing the shared interests of its members. Russian aggression in Ukraine has brought back into focus NATO’s traditional mission of territorial defense. At its 2016 summit, NATO took the prudent step of deploying combat-ready battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The United States has augmented its presence on the eastern flank, and the Trump administration has agreed to increase spending on European defense and deploy additional US troops on the continent. At its 2018 Summit, NATO established two new commands to enhance the security of maritime connections between North America and Europe as well as improved force mobility within Europe.

NATO helped end ethnic conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s and has kept troops there ever since to guard the peace. Despite the difficulties and dangers of the mission in Afghanistan, since 2003 NATO has stayed the course, standing by its first and only invocation of Article V—the commitment to collective defense—which followed the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The Alliance has contributed significantly to the campaign against the Islamic State, or ISIS, providing surveillance aircraft and helping train Iraqi forces. Moreover, NATO has deployed ships

to the Aegean and the Mediterranean to help provide maritime security and address the migration crisis.

In addition to these missions, NATO continually works to build capacity among its many partners. The Partnership for Peace offers training and exercises to Euro-Atlantic non-members. Through the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO advises many countries in the broader Middle East, including Egypt, Israel, Morocco, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. NATO has cooperation agreements with its Global Partners, which include Australia, Japan, Korea, and Pakistan. The Alliance has already opened a European Center for Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, and is in the midst of establishing a new Cyber Operations Center.

### *Why Trump is Good for NATO*

Trump's hostile attitude toward NATO, along with his "America First" approach to statecraft, are admittedly taking a serious toll on transatlantic solidarity. European confidence in American leadership has plunged during Trump's watch; some 70 percent of Europeans lack confidence in the president's handling of world affairs. Even if Trump is a one-term president and his successor seeks to restore Atlantic comity, Europeans will justifiably question whether they have a reliable and steady ally in the United States.

Of course, the transatlantic predicament could get much worse. Trump could order the withdrawal of US troops from Europe, effectively breaking NATO's military backbone. He could also decide that the United States should quit the Alliance. The North Atlantic Treaty stipulates that member states can withdraw provided they give at least one year of advance notice. Although the Senate must ratify treaties by a two-thirds margin, the Constitution is silent on withdrawal, in practice giving the president a free hand.

President George Washington in 1793 reneged on the US alliance with France; President Jimmy Carter in 1979 canceled a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan; President George W. Bush in 2002 withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—all without congressional approval. Congress has at times tried to fight back and has even turned to the courts to seek redress. But to no avail. If Trump wants out of NATO, precedent suggests that there is little Congress can do to stop him.

However, even if Trump has the authority to scuttle the Alliance, he is very unlikely to do so. There is virtually no support—in his own administration, among the American

public, or in Congress—for taking a wrecking ball to NATO. Even as Trump cycles through foreign policy advisers of various ideological persuasions, they are all competent enough to understand the abiding strategic value of NATO. The electorate similarly knows better than Trump. A 2018 Chicago Council survey indicates that 75 percent of Americans believe that the United States should either maintain or increase the nation’s commitment to NATO—exactly the same as in 2016, before Trump took office.

Congress, though currently a wasteland when it comes to cooperation across the aisle, has responded to Trump’s NATO-phobia by becoming a bipartisan cheerleading squad for the Alliance. Even as Trump disrupted last summer’s NATO summit by insulting and threatening allies—his aides reportedly finalized the summit declaration in advance to limit the damage he could do at the meeting—the Senate by a margin of 97 to two passed a resolution of support for NATO. The House did the same by a unanimous voice vote, with then-Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) calling the Alliance “indispensable.”

---

*“If Trump wants out of NATO, precedent suggests that there is little Congress can do to stop him.”*

---

This past January, following leaks that Trump was considering pulling out of NATO, the House reaffirmed support for the US commitment to collective defense and voted 357 to 22 to bar the use of federal funds to withdraw the United States from the Alliance. A bill aimed at impeding a US withdrawal from NATO has also been introduced in the Senate. According to Senator Jim Risch (R-Idaho), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “there is zero appetite in the United States Congress to leave NATO.” As another shot across Trump’s bow, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell invited NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to address a joint session of Congress when he visited Washington for the Alliance’s anniversary celebration – the first time that NATO’s leader has been extended this honor.

Support on the other side of the Atlantic is similarly strong. Around two-thirds of Europeans approve of the Alliance. Most European democracies that are not yet members of NATO are clamoring to get in. Confidence in US leadership may have plummeted, but Europeans still want their security guarantor to stay put. Furthermore, European member states are finally taking steps to increase defense

spending. 24 of NATO's 29 members increased their defense budgets in 2018, and nine NATO members will this year reach the NATO benchmark of spending two percent of GDP on defense—compared to just four members in 2014. A majority of members is on track to meet this benchmark by the target date of 2024 set at the 2014 summit.

Even Trump is applauding Europe for raising its military spending, noting in his February State of the Union that “we have secured a 100-billion-dollar increase in defense spending from NATO allies.” The uptick in spending actually began before Trump was elected as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the 2014 summit at which the two percent benchmark was formalized. Nonetheless, if letting Trump take credit for convincing Europeans to invest more in defense improves his view of the Alliance, then let's, by all means, indulge him.

---

*“Confidence in US leadership may have plummeted, but Europeans still want their security guarantor to stay put.”*

---

To be sure, Europe's leaders are hedging their bets. The European Union is undertaking defense reforms to strengthen “strategic autonomy” just in case Europeans do find themselves on their own. But that outcome is hardly their preference. Especially as Brexit and populist politics challenge the project of European integration, the last thing Europeans want is the exit of their American protector and pacifier. Moreover, Europe's new readiness to invest in defense will ultimately strengthen NATO and keep strategic decoupling at bay. The more capable Europeans are on defense, the more the United States will value the Atlantic link.

### *Closing NATO's Open Door*

Trump is right not just to insist that allies shoulder their fair share of the defense burden, but also to question the rationale for continuing to expand the Alliance, as he did when Montenegro joined in 2017. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has admitted 13 new members in Central and Eastern Europe—a move that has severely strained its relations with Russia. The Kremlin's reaction is understandable: The United States would hardly sit idly by if Russia concluded a military Alliance with Canada and Mexico and deployed Russian troops on the US border. Nonetheless, enlargement is continuing as NATO sets its sights on the Balkans. North Macedonia is next in line now that it has resolved the dispute with Greece over its name. Incorporating the

rest of the Balkan peninsula makes sense, as doing so will allow NATO to provide stability in a region still plagued by ethnic tensions and Russian meddling.

After integrating the Balkans, however, NATO should close its doors. Expanding further eastward and offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine—as promised at NATO’s 2008 summit—would risk open conflict with Russia. Indeed, Russia grabbed chunks of land in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 in part to block these countries’ bids for NATO membership. Moreover, NATO should avoid eroding its own credibility by extending its reach deep into Russia’s periphery and taking on commitments that it would be hard-pressed to uphold.

For the past decade, NATO has waffled on the future of enlargement, and it will likely continue to do so. It will insist that its doors remain open to all qualified countries, while in practice deferring on possible membership for Georgia and Ukraine, well aware of the dangers of moving forward on that front. However, NATO would be better off taking advantage of Trump’s doubts about enlargement to announce that it will shut its doors once the Balkan states are in. Doing so would prompt the countries on Russia’s periphery to pursue other options and could encourage Russia to ease off the bullying of its neighbors.

Trump’s dismissive and disparaging treatment of NATO is reckless and dangerous. But the Alliance begins its eighth decade in extraordinarily robust shape despite—and in part because of—Donald Trump.