

Anna Dimitrova*, December 1st, 2019

NATO at Seventy: The Need to Redefine the Transatlantic Bargain

The NATO Summit, held on December 3-4, 2019 in London, was supposed to celebrate the alliance's 70th anniversary. Instead, the event was marked by mounting tensions and political turmoil among NATO leaders. This was, to a large extent, expected given that plenty of warning signs of imminent discord appeared before the meeting, coming this time not only from Washington. A heated debate was caused by French President Macron's interview given to the *Economist* last November in which he claimed that "we are currently experiencing the brain-death of NATO" because "we have no coordination whatsoever of strategic decision-making between the United States and its NATO allies" and "we have an uncoordinated aggressive action by another NATO ally, Turkey, in an area where our interests are at stake". Put in the right context, Macron's claim has been triggered by two concrete actions undertaken unilaterally by two NATO members, i.e. the US and Turkey. First, President Trump's decision to withdraw the US troops from northern Syria announced by Trump himself via Twitter last October was seen, according to *Euronews*, as a betrayal of a crucial ally in the war against the Islamic State, namely the Kurdish-led forces based there². Moreover, an uncoordinated US withdrawal from Syria puts at risk NATO allies, especially France who has troops along with the Americans in Syria. Second, strongly emboldened by Trump's decision and acting upon his own interests, Turkish President Erdogan seized the opportunity to intervene against the Kurdish-led forces, considered terrorists by Turkey because of their affiliation with the Kurdistan People's Party (KPP), in order to push them back from the Turkish border with Syria. Erdogan went even further in his actions by not only obtaining a military back-up from Russia, but also issuing an ultimatum to reject NATO's military plan for defending Poland and the Baltic states in the event of a Russian attack unless NATO allies recognize Kurdish fighters in Syria as terrorists. Beyond all reactions and criticism that Macron's statement spurred among both American and European officials, it is worth noting that his words are meant, as the French President himself stressed it, to act as a wake-up call for Europe to do a reality check and redefine its role of a security actor within the transatlantic alliance.

In these troubled times for NATO, it is necessary to go back to the initial transatlantic bargain in order to see if it still holds or if it needs to be redefined in the context of Trump's America disengagement from Europe, a rising China, a revanchist Russia, and the presence of authoritarian leaders in the EU's backyard.

The good old transatlantic bargain

While the transatlantic relationship has been enshrined in treaties determining the political obligations of the United States and its European allies, it is also underpinned by a set of unwritten rules based on shared interests, goals and expectations about mutual understanding and cooperation. The notion of "proactive engagement" is inherent to the transatlantic security relationship and is best captured by the concept of "transatlantic bargain". This concept was coined by the former US ambassador to NATO (1965-1969), Harlan Cleveland. According to Cleveland, the transatlantic bargain is "the glue that held the allies more or less together [...] - partly an understanding among the Europeans, but mostly a deal between them and the United States of America³". Seen in this light, the transatlantic bargain was not simply an American-European *quid-pro-quo*, but rather a process of mutual negotiation through consultation and reasonable sharing of risks, resources and benefits: "It is a "bargain" to be sure, but a bargain with roots in the hearts as well as in the minds of the partners"⁴.

At the heart of the transatlantic security relationship lies NATO, which in Cleveland's sense was defined not only as a security alliance driven by rational choice calculations and national self-interests, but also as a security community rooted in shared values. The original bargain reached by both sides of the Atlantic with the signature and the subsequent ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 was shaped by the basic deal according to which the United States pledged its continued involvement in European security arrangements in return for a European commitment to organize itself both for external defense and internal stability. Thus the transatlantic bargain was initially grounded in the indivisibility of security and prosperity of the Atlantic community. What best characterizes this complex and dynamic bargain has been until today

the tacit agreement between the United States and Europe that the US provides Europe with security protection and access to American markets within an open global economy, while in return the European allies agree to accept the US economic and military leadership and act as reliable and effective partners for the US in managing common regional and international challenges⁵.

“America first”, NATO last

The above-depicted view of the transatlantic bargain seen as a compact between America and Europe to ensure the security and well-being of the Atlantic community has been sustained and adapted to the changing international system notwithstanding recurrent crises and US-European policy divisions over a number of issues such as the 2003 war in Iraq, the 2011 civil war in Libya, arms control and weapons of mass destruction, climate change, etc. However, since Donald Trump’s election for President in 2016 and the adoption of his “America First” foreign policy agenda the long-standing transatlantic bargain has been falling apart. The main reason for this is that Trump’s understanding of the transatlantic relationship marks a radical departure from Cleveland’s sense of the transatlantic bargain. This bargain is now seen in its transactional and negative connotation of a contract implying a business-like relationship, whereby the Europeans, according to Trump, have failed to meet their obligations. Moreover, the President’s apparent skepticism of multilateral treaties and mistrust in key alliance structures such as NATO, are historically unprecedented and set a challenge for Europe and the liberal international order⁶ as such. During his campaign, Trump called the alliance “obsolete” because of not doing enough to fight terrorism and, once in office, he almost made conditional the US commitment to Article 5 on whether the European allies have “fulfilled their [financial] obligations to us”⁷. Of course, the issue of fair burden-sharing between the US and its European allies is as old as the Alliance itself⁸. However, no other US President before Trump had gone as far as to threaten to withdraw US forces from Europe if European allies fail to meet the NATO’s 2 percent of GDP target for defense spending.

Containing Trump’s NATO bashing

Some senior officials in the Trump administration have been trying hard to temper Trump’s harsh statements about NATO. For instance, Vice President Mike Spence declared at the Munich Security Conference in February 2017 that “the United States

of America strongly supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment to this trans-Atlantic alliance”⁹. Both then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis and the former national security adviser John Bolton warned President Trump that an eventual US withdrawal from the 70-year-old alliance would drastically reduce the American influence in Europe, which would be damaging to the US interests and could embolden Russia for decades. The US Congress even took unprecedented measures to counter any potential move of the President regarding NATO by voting in January 2019 a bipartisan legislation known as the NATO Support Act¹⁰ aimed to prohibit the withdrawal of the United States from the alliance without Senate approval.

Indeed, Trump’s position on NATO has been fraught with controversy. For instance, shortly after having declined to endorse Article 5 in his speech at the 2017 NATO summit in Brussels¹¹, President Trump declared during a press conference that the United States stood firmly behind Article 5¹². Moreover, despite Trump’s constant criticism of the European allies, the official foreign policy and strategy-focused documents of his administration clearly reaffirm the US commitment to Europe, by stressing that “The United States remains firmly committed to our European allies and partners. The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty”¹³.

President Trump’s back-and-forth approach to NATO has undoubtedly strained the transatlantic security relationship, thus making some analysts view Trump as “NATO’s most urgent, and often most difficult, problem” linked to the absence of strong, principled American presidential leadership for the first time in the alliance’s history¹⁴.

It is thus worth asking the following question: to what extent has Trump’s controversy on the role of NATO affected the transatlantic alliance? Some commentators argue that Trump’s transactional approach to managing NATO represents “an existential threat”¹⁵ to the alliance, which comes less from his inconsistent policy positions than from some of his core beliefs of world politics seen as a bargaining process aimed to defend the American economic and security interests at any rate. According to this position, President Trump has bluntly rejected the old transatlantic bargain in which America’s commitment to Europe has never been questioned, nor has been the arrangement, though

based on an imbalanced burden-sharing, by which the United States carries an outsize share of the responsibility for European security¹⁶. The military imbalance agreed upon by both sides of the Atlantic in the name of shared interests, goals and values has become unacceptable for Trump.

By contrast, some analysts consider that Trump's effect on the transatlantic alliance should not be overstated given that the transatlantic security relationship has always been complicated, especially if one remembers the high tensions between the United States and its allies caused by George W. Bush's unilateralist decision to invade Iraq in 2003¹⁷. From this point of view, the current transatlantic crisis is deemed to be above all a result of power asymmetry between the United States and Europe¹⁸, as well as Washington's unwillingness to support any longer the European free riding on American security guarantees.

The power asymmetry debate again

The power asymmetry debate tends to focus on the defense spending and military capabilities of the US and Europe. Already before Trump's election, the widening gap between American and European shares of NATO defense spending has received serious criticism by US officials, the harshest one being made by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. In his 2011 farewell speech, Gates labelled NATO a "two-tiered alliance: between members who specialize in "soft" humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the "hard" combat missions. Between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership – be they security guarantees or headquarters billets – but don't want to share the risks and the costs. This is no longer a hypothetical worry. We are there today. And it is unacceptable.¹⁹" Indeed, there has never been a binding obligation for NATO members to meet the 2% target precisely because stemming from the old transatlantic bargain the Atlantic alliance was not seen as a classical military organization, but as a security community to which every country had a special contribution to make. This contribution does not boil down to national defense spending alone. It also includes other non-military contributions to security such as development aid. As recently as in 2014, the Russian intervention in Ukraine brought NATO members' attention back to consider more seriously the importance of the defense spending target, especially the one of the

European allies bound to ensure their backyard security. A breakthrough in fostering European NATO members' defense spending was the Wales Summit in September 2014 where all NATO members acknowledged the 2% goal as a political priority and committed themselves to "move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets and filling NATO's capability shortfalls²⁰". The Wales Declaration has made a difference since the majority of European allies have started increasing their defense budgets though not to the extent that would satisfy the Trump administration.

At the core of the burden-sharing debate also lies the fact that the American and European perceptions of power, as well as their approaches to international security, are fundamentally different, and this has been the case long before the election of Donald Trump. On the one hand, America defines itself as a hard-power global security actor willing and able to act unilaterally to secure its interests, use a full range of military resources (i.e. drones strikes, covert actions, nuclear weapons), deploy troops globally and use military force in an unconstrained manner. The EU, on the other hand, "likes to think of itself as a normative power, leveraging its regulatory expertise and vast, integrated single market to shape global norms and rules on everything from environmental protection to data privacy"²¹. Hence, the EU has a more integrated and soft-power focused approach to foreign security as it acts more as a "civilian power" based on multilateral cooperation through institutions, the rule of international law and support for the UN system²². However, this "functional logic" underpinning the US-European security relationship is no longer acceptable for Trump who has stridently called for increased defense spending of the European allies and more responsibility taken by the Europeans to solve their own problems.

Towards a new transatlantic bargain?

President Trump has called into question the transatlantic bargain itself. In his view the transatlantic alliance is no longer expected to act as a security community based on shared goals and values, but rather as a security company driven by its members' self-interests and individual budget contributions. To prevent this transformation from happening to NATO, the United States and Europe should work on a new bargain in which all allies agree to a stronger mandate for the alliance to meet security changes both in Europe and beyond with the US reconfirming

its role of security guarantor for Europe and the European allies committing to concrete measures for increasing defense spending and becoming more efficient and autonomous security partners.

The United States and Europe both need a new transatlantic security bargain to face today's numerous security challenges such as Russia's assertive foreign policy in Ukraine, the Iranian nuclear agreement following the withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), China's growing footprint in Europe due to its increased investments, the Syrian civil war after the announced departure of US forces, among others. A new transatlantic bargain should be built on the US leadership, all while seeking to bolster both the American and European security. Such a bargain will not be easy to achieve because of Trump's tit-for-tat perception of the Atlantic relationship and his mercantilist and nationalist approach to foreign policy, which is at odds with core European interests and values. The EU has been going through hard times, too, particularly concerning the prolonged and complex Brexit negotiations and the recent rise of right-wing nationalist parties in a number of European countries.

Nonetheless, despite the challenges it poses to the European officials, "the Trump administration could be the catalyst for long overdue changes for the Alliance"²³. NATO has to redefine its role in today's fast-changing world, all while remembering that Washington cannot find "better allies" than the Europeans and that the transatlantic alliance remains "the strongest and most constraining alliance in the American history"²⁴.

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