

How Strong is the United States Commitment to NATO?

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Despite concerns about President Trump's commitment to NATO given the statements he made during the 2016 presidential campaign, and the ambivalence he demonstrated after becoming president to reaffirming Article 5, there is far more continuity than change when it comes to America's policy toward NATO. Support for NATO is one of the few issues in the United States that commands bipartisan backing among the general public and on Capitol Hill. The Trump national security team – H.R. McMaster, James Mattis and Rex Tillerson – is strongly pro-NATO, and despite Trump's seeming misunderstanding of how NATO works, he has allowed their proclivities to prevail. The deeper problem for NATO will be the lack of commitment by the president to American leadership of the liberal world order, which over time has the potential to erode relations between the United States and Europe.

The most notable feature of President Trump's approach to NATO was chastising alliance members over the failure of the vast majority to spend 2% of their GDP on defense. Previous administrations had expressed concerns over European failures in this regard (remember that in his farewell remarks, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued the alliance was becoming two-tiered, with those willing to bear the necessary burdens in one group and those who simply enjoyed the benefits of the alliance in the other). However, while concerns over burden sharing are longstanding, Trump was making a different argument, suggesting that NATO was somehow akin to a protection racket whereby allies owed the United States money for providing for their security. There were even reports that he presented German



Chancellor Angela Merkel with a bill for what her country owed America. This concern was compounded given his reluctance to state his support for Article 5 seemingly because he believed that only those countries that contributed enough should be provided an American security guarantee.

Despite the concerns, U.S. NATO policy has remained unchanged. In the aftermath of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO took steps to reassure the Eastern members such as Estonia and Poland that the alliance would defend them against the renewed threat from Russia. The United States continues its strong support for increased air and sea patrols in the Baltic and Black Sea regions and for the rotating deployments in the East to deter Russian aggression. In his December 2016 speech on U.S.-European relations at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasized the American commitment to Europe in the face of what he called a "recently resurgent Russia."

The United States has also maintained its strong commitment to punishing Russia over Ukraine by maintaining the sanctions regime with its European partners. Tillerson appointed former U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO Kurt Volker as his special representative for Ukraine negotiations, and Volker has been collaborating closely with European allies. In late December 2017, the Trump administration even approved the sale of lethal military assistance to Ukraine to raise the costs to Russia of maintaining its support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine, a move Barack Obama declined to take over fears of escalating the crisis.

So perhaps for all the fears of the unpredictability of the Trump presidency, when it comes to transatlantic ties, Europeans can remain assured of the United States commitment to Europe. And while in the case of NATO that should remain true, the central feature of the Trump foreign policy – the emphasis on nationalism as embodied by the phrase “America First” – has the potential to erode the bonds between the United States and Europe. It will be increasingly difficult to maintain strong transatlantic relations if – although the United States maintains a strong commitment to NATO – it is at the same time undermining the European Union. Trump has made clear his disdain for the notion of a liberal international order led by the United States, arguing that allies have simply taken advantage of the United States over previous decades. And his hyper-nationalist approach to international affairs runs against the entire foundation on which the European Union is built.

During his presidential campaign, Trump strongly supported Brexit, seeing a parallel to those who supported Britain’s departure from the EU with his own efforts to put America first. He then had kind words for French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who sought a similar path for France. Finally, while he reaffirmed the United States commitment to Europe in his speech in Poland in July 2016, he also sounded the nationalist themes that put him at odds with the European project. Soon after Trump became president, European Council President Donald Tusk went so far as to call the United States a threat to Europe.

Trump’s position on a number of international issues are at odds with sentiment in Europe. The United States gave notice of its formal withdrawal from the Paris Accords, which left the United States alone in the world opposing the multilateral agreement to combat climate change. Trump continues to hint at withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed to in 2015 to halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program. Moreover, aversion to previous free trade agreements led him to not only walk away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and flirt with doing the same with respect to the North American Free Trade Agreement but also to potentially abandon the World Trade Organization.

The United States commitment to NATO remains strong. It garners broad public and Congressional support, and Trump’s national security team is as pro-Alliance as their predecessors. Trump believes he has galvanized new military spending in Europe, so for the moment, the 2% issue is on the back-burner. U.S. efforts to reassure NATO’s eastern members in the face of Russian aggression continue unabated, and if anything, the United States has strengthened its support for Ukraine.

But all is not well in the transatlantic relationship. Support for NATO is important, but the perception that the United States seeks to undermine the European Union is highly consequential, as are U.S. policies toward the Paris Accords and the JCPOA. Transatlantic ties are more than just NATO, and unless Trump’s views on the value of a liberal international order evolve, the divergence across the Atlantic will increase to the detriment of both sides.