

A Post-Post-Cold-War NATO

The U.S.-led alliance has been very successful for most of a century. Now what?

by Conrad Black



It is a bit rich to hear French president Emmanuel Macron announce that NATO is suffering “a brain death” because of “a lack of American commitment.” France has allowed her armed forces to dwindle down to an aircraft carrier, six nuclear submarines with nuclear-tipped missiles, a modest but well-armed air force, and an army of about 100,000, a fifth of Turkey’s. This is the army that in other times was the greatest in Europe prior to the unification of Germany in 1871, was the silent force in French political history, and produced that nation’s greatest leaders, particularly Napoleon and Charles de Gaulle. This was the army that, with the Royal (British) Navy, was the shield defending Western Europe and North America from the dangers of Central and Eastern Europe between the founding of the Alliance Cordiale, ending eight centuries of Anglo–French animosity, in 1904, to the fall of

France under the hob-nailed jackboot of Nazi Germany in 1940.

The United States, the country in NATO least likely to be attacked by any other country (except possibly for Canada), or by any terrorist outrage directly traceable to another country, has brought its military capabilities up to their highest point since the end of the Cold War nearly 30 years ago. Of course, the United States is the only country with legitimate strategic interests around the world and it is the only country that can correctly determine the level of force that is necessary to protect those interests adequately and provide the level of deterrence that meets the counsel of Publius Fabius Vegetius Renatus in the late fourth century: "If you wish peace, prepare for war." Rome had practiced that for seven centuries when Vegetius wrote it, but had reached a state of such political and moral dissolution that it was about to be overthrown in the west and comprehensively defeated and subjugated by barbarians. Though commentators who don't know better (they are numerous) frequently claim that the United States is in sight of such a fate, it is very far from it.

The problem with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is anything but an absence of American commitment. The United States is absolutely committed to preventing or responding effectively to attacks on NATO countries, but it is unwilling to maintain a false spirit of egalitarian collegiality with allies that are just free riders on the deterrent and counterattack force of the American armed forces. The remark of President Macron is doubly odd because France is about to enjoy a periodic up-thrust of its influence in Europe as Britain partially disengages from it. Germany is in some political turmoil as Chancellor Merkel has stayed too long in office, and it is becoming steadily more difficult to be confident of German political stability. A German chancellor, like a British or Canadian prime minister, can continue in office only if the government retains the support of a

majority in the principal legislative house. This is becoming very difficult in Germany, where there are six national parties and the traditional governing Christian and Social Democrats barely enjoy a majority between them.

In these circumstances, Macron, despite his tenuous position in the polls, the modest benefit of his economic reforms, and his ineffectual response to the yellow-vested malcontents, has an increase in stature due to his fixed five-year term. France will have a great deal more influence in a European Union of 27 than it has had in a Europe of 28 including the United Kingdom. Italy, although the rising political forces are intelligent conservatives who may accomplish something useful (a rare occurrence in Italian politics), is in a state of political disorganization, as it usually is; Spain is in some turmoil because of a prolonged recession and the Catalan separatism crisis. With the bar lowered, France could become the EU's leading power. Despite its extraordinary fluctuations of fortune, France has never lost the attitude and vocation of a great power.

The problem with NATO is that it needs a new purpose. It was the most successful alliance in the history of the world, as it held the line without losing a square inch of territory to the Soviet Union, even when West Berlin was extremely vulnerable and under serious threat. When the USSR disintegrated, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, the former Iron Curtain satellite countries were free to choose their own regimes and foreign policies, and Germany was reunited, it was no longer obvious what NATO's purpose was. But it had been so successful, and the new members in Eastern Europe were so eager for the NATO umbrella to ensure that the oppressive 45-year Russian domination would not recur, they leapt into NATO and have been relatively diligent members. Poland and Estonia, along with the United Kingdom, are the only member states that have met the 2 percent-of-GDP threshold in defense commitments, along with the United States. (Greece briefly

did, but only because of the implosion of their economy.)

France, as a nuclear power, no longer needs the luxury of a large military. Britain values the American Alliance, which achieved such prodigies under Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and again under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. That aspect of the Western Alliance appears ready for a congenial relaunch under Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. (The evolution in the personalities of the leaders is as striking with the British as with the Americans, though Johnson wrote a very thin volume on Churchill and Trump has taken to quoting Roosevelt. The office makes the man to some extent, even if it doesn't seek him.)

With the break-up of the USSR and the collapse of international Communism, the principal strategic danger, which President Trump intuitively perceives but his opponents are too obtuse or malicious to grasp (and so they have muddied the domestic political waters), is that Russia, if faced down into the arms of China, could agree to rent a chunk of Siberia on a royalty arrangement to China to be exploited by surplus Chinese manpower. The fusion of resource-rich Siberia with Chinese manpower and exploitive skills would make poor and overpopulated China a full-scale rival to the United States. NATO (i.e. the U.S.) should negotiate a non-aggression and partial-cooperation agreement with Russia to keep it out of the embrace of China. The West can certainly be a more attractive dancing partner for Russia than China, and it should reinforce relations with India and subtly encourage the commercial and strategic independence of the Far Eastern, South Asian, and Australasian neighbors of China, all while managing Sino-American relations carefully.

NATO should probably be expanded to other regions and accept any passably democratic countries that bring anything to the alliance, as a world alliance of nations whose frontiers are mutually guaranteed. All members are welcome to remain, but the vote in NATO council meetings should be withdrawn from any

country that does not meet three quarters of its contribution target. And something must be done about Turkey. Now that the United States is no longer assigning itself the task of deploying 400 men to prevent Turkey from conducting reprisals against the Kurds (and the widely predicted humanitarian disasters have not occurred), it should be possible to rebuild that relationship, it being understood that Turkish president Erdogan is no more convivial than Russia's Putin or China's Xi Jinping. It is time for a little creative thinking. The United States can deal from strength, and the Europeans and Canadians will follow, whatever histrionics are staged in Paris. After all these years, we are accustomed to those.

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