

NATO and the Trump Administration

by Michael Curtis



Alone together, beyond the crowd, above the world, to cling together, we're strong as we're together.

On December 3-4, 2019 the 70th anniversary of NATO, the collective military self-defense alliance of 29 countries, will be held outside London. It remains to be seen if this gathering will be of one of celebration, or of feuding and tension, whether it is an organization that is obsolete or still relevant. Differences over this have been expressed in the last month as a result of a strong negative statement by French President Emmanuel Macron on November 7, 2019 and a series of rebuttals by others.

Fearing a Communist expansion in Europe, and after the

Communist overthrow of the democratic government of Czechoslovakia in February 1948, the U.S. and 11 other countries founded NATO on April 4, 1949, the basis of the Western military bulwark against the Soviet Union. It proclaimed two functions; political and militarily: it was to promote democratic values and cooperation on defense, and to solve problems, to prevent conflict by peaceful resolution of conflict, and undertake crisis management. Its members gradually increased until the present 29 members. In curious, but political, fashion the "North Atlantic" has always been an elastic and changeable area. Geographers might be bewitched, bothered and bewildered to find Turkey, Croatia, Montenegro, and Slovenia in the area.

The very existence of NATO has in 2019 become a heated subject as a result of Macron's comments. In unusually blunt remarks Macron, the modern-day version of the Athenian Alcibiades, strategic adviser, politician, proponent of an aggressive foreign policy, said that NATO is "brain dead." What was needed, he said, was a wakeup call and for questions to be asked. The original intent of NATO was to protect Europe against the possible Russian menace. Macron explained in the present there are various factors to be considered: peace in Europe; the post Intermediate-range nuclear forces; the relationship with Russia; the possible withdrawal of U.S. forces from Germany; the Turkish Kurd issue and military operations. So, who is or who are the enemies?

Europeans have to reassess not only these factors but also the degree of commitment of the U.S. to the alliance. They wonder if Washington is turning its back on NATO as evidenced by President Donald Trump's sudden decision to pull troops out of Syria. Macron argues that Europe must stop acting as a junior ally of the U.S. Europe must develop a military and political bloc, having greater influence on policy.

Not surprisingly, criticism of Macron was immediate. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo responded, "I think NATO

remains an important, critically, perhaps historically one of the most critical, strategic partnerships in all of recorded history.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel rejected Macron’s view, saying he has used “drastic words” that were not my view of cooperation in NATO. Such weeping judgements are not necessary, even if we have problems. It is correct to have a European pillar for defense within NATO, but it must be with NATO, not against it. Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of NATO replied that the U.S, and Europe were working together more than they had for decades. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on November 29, 2019 was particularly bitter, telling Macron “have your own brain death checked.” Macron has a “sick and shallow” understanding of NATO.

The key element of NATO is the principle of collective defense. Article 5 of the alliance states that members are bound to protect each other and an armed attack on one is considered as an attack on all members. Article 5 has been only invoked once, by the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks. In November 16, 2015 after the terrorist attack in Paris, France did not invoke Article 5, but wanted to act on its own.

Is President Trump committed to NATO? It is true that Trump proclaimed that NATO was obsolete, but on April 12, 2017 he changed his mind stating then and later that he was committing the U.S. to Article 5. Yet doubt remains. Trump is uncertain whether to fight for Montenegro and thus honor Article 5. He has also remarked that the U.S. might defend only NATO allies that met their military spending obligations. Trump pulled out of the atomic weapon control treaty with Russia, and opposes the nuclear accord with Iran.

Yet the U.S. is not the only country to warn members of the alliance they cannot expect support from allies. Macron has announced it will not support Turkey if it continued to carry out military operations in Syria without coordination. Similarly, Turkey says it will not accept NATO defense plans unless other members agree that the YPG Kurdish militia is a

terrorist group.

The acute differences over the strategy and the funding of NATO will be on the agenda on December 3, 2019. Macron is annoyed with Merkel's slow pragmatism and coalition government. He wants longer-term strategic proposals, a new strategic review of NATO's mission; the last one was in 2010.

It is well to consider the positive role that NATO has been playing. NATO aircraft helped patrol the skies over the U.S. for several months 2001-2 after 9/11. Naval forces were sent for counter terrorism purposes in eastern Mediterranean. Missiles were deployed on the border of Turkey and Syria in 2012.

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its support of a separatist uprising in east Ukraine, NATO decided to suspend cooperation with the Russian Federation. Over 4,000 troops are stationed in Poland and the Baltic countries as deterrent against potential Russian aggression. NATO helped the U.S. in the Afghanistan war from August 2003 to December 2014; at one point it deployed 130,000 troops there. But it does not intervene in civil wars of members or internal coups. It did not intervene in the case of the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016. Yet it did consider intervening when Russia invaded Ukraine, which had worked with NATO, in light of Putin's threat to create a new Russia out of the eastern Ukraine region.

Co-operation among the allies takes a number of forms. They include a space surveillance network, the air transport command, sharing military transport aircraft, launching by UK and eight others of a joint expeditionary force, 10,000 strong unit, a rapid response force. At its meeting on July 11, 2018, NATO approved new steps against Russia. They include two new military commands and expanded cyber warfare and counter terrorism.

If Trump is uncertain on NATO strategic issues, he is clear, even obsessed, with funding of NATO and with the fact that the U.S. has been paying a disproportionate share of defense costs. In

agreement in 2014 members pledged to increase their defense spending to 2% of their GDP by 2024. Yet in 2019 only the U.S., UK, Greece, Estonia, Romania, Poland, and Latvia, have met or surpassed the 2% target. Moreover, this 2% does not in itself increase NATO's funding.

Funding is both direct and indirect. The indirect or national contributions are the largest, and come from a member contributing deployment of troops to a military operation. Direct contributions are for the alliance as a whole, such as NATO wide air defense or command and control systems, and not the responsibility of any single member. Costs for this are borne collectively.

The common funding budget is divided into three main categories; civil (NATO headquarters), military, the integrated command structure, and the NATO security investment program for capital expenditures.

The civil budget provides for personnel expenses, operating costs, and expenditure of the international staff at NATO headquarters in Brussels. It is calculated for 2019 to be \$286 million. The military budget funds the NATO command structure, for 2019 is \$1.54 million. It is financed with contributions from national defense budgets according to agreed cost shares.

The NATO security investment program covers major construction and command and control system investments, beyond the requirements of individual members, such as air defense communication and information systems. It is financed by the ministries of defense of each member country.

Members provide funding for these 3 categories, according to a

two year cost sharing formula, based on member' gross national income. In the formulas 2016 and 2017, the U.S. paid 22.14%, Germany 14.65%, France 10.63%, and UK 9.85% of the total. By a new formula in 2019, the U.S. direct contribution will be reduced from 22% to 16%.

NATO has focused primarily on territorial defense. Important other issues remain: a common policy towards Russia; agreement on Kosovo; the NATO military commander who so far has always been American. A key issue for the December meeting is whether NATO is prepared to tackle other problems such as terrorism and mass migration. Perhaps Trump will start a discussion on the China issue.