NATO Needs a Revamped Purpose

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was established in 1949 to promote the containment of the Soviet Union, but it lacks such a clear purpose today.

by Conrad Black

There was a good deal of accusatory moaning in the late election campaign about President Trump's relations with U.S. allies. In fact, one of his accomplishments which is generally approved by Americans is his success in persuading other NATO countries to commit to an additional $400 billion of defense spending and to bootstrap themselves a long way towards the agreed target of two percent of GDP devoted to defense. This is not really an onerous obligation for countries that benefit from an American military guarantee of their security backed by America's overwhelmingly powerful conventional and nuclear armed forces.

The British and French are also nuclear powers, though much less well-armed than the United States. But they do provide a

deterrent force within Western Europe. Prior to President Trump embarking upon his crusade to encourage higher levels of NATO military commitment, only Britain, Poland, and the diminutive Estonia were at or above the two percent threshold. (Greece briefly joined this fraternity when its economy collapsed so badly that the military share of it rose above 2 percent, but not because of any increase to the defense budget.)

For the rest, there was an unstated pretense to being entitled graciously to receive the military guarantee of the United States for their security while treating America, under cover of virtuous egalitarian collegiality, as a great guard dog that would protect the West while the genteel European slackers held the leash and gave the orders.

Trump was absolutely right to blow up this hypocrisy, and most Americans supported him.

But there is another problem with the Western alliance: an absence of a defined purpose.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was established in 1949 to promote the containment of the USSR—a strategy devised by American foreign policy specialist George F. Kennan, with the support of future Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson, and General George C. Marshall, the eminent secretary of state and defense and wartime chairman of the combined allied military chiefs. This policy of deterring Soviet-led subversion or outright invasion of Western Europe was based initially upon the principle that within NATO an attack upon one is an attack upon all— although the next clause of the treaty provides that in the event of such attack each member state will determine its appropriate response.

Deterrence also relied upon the almost-simultaneous Marshall Plan, which assisted Western Europe’s economic recovery from the ravages of World War II and particularly assisted the

democratic political factions in those countries to dampen the temptations of Communism. (It's worth remembering that the Communist parties of France and Italy polled over 20 percent of the vote in French and Italian elections from the end of World War II into the 1980s.)

At the most critical moments of the Cold War, many of the NATO allied leaders were formidable statesmen taken seriously by contemporary American presidents and pulling their weight usefully, and even sometimes leading in the supreme councils of the Western Alliance. Several of the British prime ministers, most conspicuously Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, were profoundly respected and reliable allies. So was the founding chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer, whom Churchill accurately described as "the greatest German statesman since Bismarck." Several of Adenauer's successors, especially Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl, were valued and influential associate leaders of the Western Alliance.

So, when crises arose, was Charles de Gaulle, who though frequently somewhat spiteful toward the Anglo-Saxons, as he described them, resurrected France as a great power, and in doing so strengthened the West. In the most tense moment of the Cold War, when President Kennedy sent former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to explain the facts of Cuban missile crisis to de Gaulle just before Kennedy publicly addressed the issue, the French president told Acheson he had been accustomed to taking the word of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower and he had no hesitation in doing so with Kennedy. De Gaulle said he did not need to examine the reconnaissance photographs that Acheson had brought, while adding as a former military commander he would be interested in looking at them out of curiosity, not skepticism.

Many others contributed importantly to the NATO alliance, including Canada's Brian Mulroney, who was so influential in Washington that he delivered eulogies at the state funerals of

President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush.

The Cold War ended in bloodless victory 30 years ago as the infamous Berlin Wall came down, as famously demanded in addresses delivered beside it by John F. Kennedy in 1963 and Ronald Reagan in 1987. NATO was thus the most successful alliance in world history and it has since added many former Soviet bloc countries to its membership and extends now between the United States, Canada, and Iceland as far east as Estonia on the Baltic and Turkey on the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

But such an immense group of countries isn't really needed to contain Russia, and while NATO has participated in many operations in the Middle East, its role has not been redefined. French President Emmanuel Macron last year said NATO was "brain dead"—not a flattering comment upon himself, and a severe reproach. But there is both an absence of contemporary purpose for the alliance, and an absence of statesmen to operate it. Except for possibly British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, if he can complete Brexit and revive his prestige after the debacle of COVID-19, and Macron, who is a thoughtful and at times a somewhat original leader but prone to too many faddish preoccupations, there are no Allied leaders on either side of the Atlantic to assist a U.S. president in elaborating a policy as the people mentioned above, and others did.

President Trump has made an important contribution to NATO in strengthening it but not in policy terms, and he has not been well or favorably understood in Europe, apart from parts of Eastern Europe that remain fearful of the Russians. No American president has had much impact in Europe since the first President Bush as the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disintegrated. No one could express much confidence that Joe Biden and Anthony Blinken will get much beyond conviviality and platitudes about climate change.

But what is needed is a new role and mission in the world: NATO could be the cornerstone of a coalition of democratic states stretching around the world and maintaining the principle of collective self-defense. It should generally require a reasonable level of democratic government and civil liberties, criteria that are already being strained by Turkey in particular.

There is certainly a role for such a league of democratic states united in a defensive alliance. But in order to conceive such an enterprise, the West needs more imaginative leaders, and not only in the United States. Europe must shake off its torpor and elevate leaders who command the respect of Americans. People of the stature of Churchill, Adenauer, de Gaulle, and Thatcher arise very rarely, but the West needs more Schmidts and Mulroneys to expand the goals of the Western alliance and plant its leadership firmly on both sides of the Atlantic.

As with many other desirable objectives, we may have to wait some time for any hint of that from Washington. Colin Powell and Mike Pompeo have been competent, but there hasn’t been strong leadership in the State Department since George Shultz and James Baker.

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