

Assessing the Value of the NATO Alliance

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Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee on Foreign Relations on the subject of the value of the NATO alliance. I want to make clear that my views are mine alone and that I am not speaking for the Council on Foreign Relations, which takes no institutional positions on matters of policy.

I admit to being somewhat surprised that this is the subject of a hearing just now. Although the question of NATO's value was understandably raised at various times over recent decades, I would have thought the Russian interventions in Ukraine and Georgia, its interference in the elections and referenda of various NATO members, and NATO's role in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and its other "out of area" contributions would have settled the question. But the one thing we should have learned from recent months and years is to be careful of assumptions and of taking anything for granted. That is one reason why this hearing is well-timed, as Congress has the ability to be a much-needed classroom for the country.

Let me take a step back before I address today's topic directly. We are in what can best be understood as the third era of NATO. The first, which began with NATO's inception and ran for four decades until the end of the Cold War, was dominated by the effort to deter and to prepare to defend against the threat that the

Warsaw Pact posed to the Atlantic democracies. NATO was also a vehicle for promoting stability and trust among the countries of Western Europe and North America, seeking to eliminate the dangerous impulses that had twice before in the previous half-century triggered war at great cost to themselves and the world. In all this and more NATO succeeded. The Cold War stayed cold until it ended on terms even optimists had difficulty envisioning.

Success, however, created its own questions, including whether NATO was still needed and, if so, in what form and with what functions. The answer was that NATO still had a role to play, one defined by enlargement and the consolidation of democracy in former Warsaw Pact countries and, additionally, in going out of area to meet shared security challenges beyond the formal treaty area. Actions were undertaken in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Libya, albeit with decidedly mixed results.

Another function for NATO in this, its second era, was to stay in business so as to provide a hedge against the unavoidable uncertainty as to what sort of an international actor Russia would turn out to be. Enlargement was successful in that NATO membership increased from 16 to 29 countries and we have seen no armed Russian aggression against any NATO member. Whether NATO enlargement contributed to Russian alienation and the emergence of a Russian threat to Europe makes for an interesting historical inquiry, but it is just that. We are where we are.

What is most relevant for our purpose here today is that NATO is now in its third era, one that began in earnest with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014. What was a possible Russian threat had become an actual one. At the same time, out of area challenges have not gone away. Democracy has proven difficult to promote in new members and appears to be struggling in some older ones. All of which leads us to the questions of the day: Does NATO still have value? If so, how much? And what can be done to increase that value?

The answer to the first question is that yes, NATO continues to have value, and substantial value at that. I expect that European defense spending levels and military preparedness will figure prominently in today's conversation, but it is essential that a legitimate concern over burden-sharing not blind us to the no less important reality of benefit-sharing. The United States stays in and supports NATO as a favor not to Europeans but to itself. NATO membership is an act of strategic self-interest, not philanthropy.

NATO members rallied to our side in the aftermath of September 11. The United States has gained in important ways from a Europe that has been largely peaceful, stable, prosperous, and democratic. NATO members have proven to be dependable, capable partners out of area; the troops of NATO members have fought and died alongside American troops in Afghanistan. Out-of-area missions in and around Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa will be required for the foreseeable future given the resilience of terrorists and the need to enhance the capabilities of local states fighting them. Here I would concur with what was

agreed on by all NATO members a little over a month ago, that “the Alliance remains an essential source of stability in an increasingly unpredictable world.”

One piece of good news is that the United States can afford what NATO costs. Total U.S. defense spending, which helps us to meet our global responsibilities and protect U.S. interests worldwide, is less than half the Cold War average as measured by percentage of GDP. What the United States spends on NATO and European defense is but a fraction of that. We can have the guns we need without sacrificing the butter we want. NATO and what this country does in the world more generally cannot be blamed for the sorry state of much of our infrastructure, the poor quality of many of our public schools, or our ballooning public debt. What is more, American society could not insulate itself from the adverse effects of a world characterized by greater disarray, something certain to result if NATO ceased to exist.

Central to NATO’s continuing relevance is that Russia poses an all-too-real threat to what we used to call the West. It has modernized its conventional and unconventional military capabilities and demonstrated both an ability and a willingness to use them effectively. In Georgia, Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and Syria, Russia has resorted to both conventional and hybrid warfare to pursue its interests. Russia has also demonstrated the ability and will to employ cyber-related tools to influence and disrupt its neighbors, other European countries, and, as we know, democracy in this country.

Russia needs to know that the United States and its NATO partners have both the will and the ability to respond locally to anything it might do. Deterrence is obviously preferable to defense. But deterrence is never far removed from the perception that the Alliance is willing and able to defend its interests. This argues for the stationing of military forces in and around areas that Russia might claim or move against, something that translates into maintaining sizable U.S. ground and air forces in Europe. In light of the current political discord within and among Western democracies, it is entirely conceivable that Moscow could seek to test the readiness of NATO members to stand by the Article 5 common defense clause. The United States needs to be prepared as well for the sort of “gray zone” aggression Russia has employed in eastern Ukraine, with its dispatching of irregular forces and arming of locals. Such tactics may not trigger NATO’s Article 5, but they threaten stability all the same; what is required is training along with arms and intelligence support so that those NATO members near Russia can cope with such “Article 4 ½” challenges should they materialize.

Capabilities can be further enhanced through the regular dispatch of visiting forces and frequent military exercises. Such activity also underscores commitment and concern, thereby reassuring friends and allies and signaling actual or would-be foes. It is important that all this be done locally in areas of potential threat and with conventional military forces, as the United States never wants to put itself in a position where the only response to a challenge is to escalate, whether by expanding a crisis in terms of geography or in the type of weaponry, or to acquiesce to the results of successful aggression.

All that said, there are other steps to be taken to increase the value of the Alliance. Yes, NATO members, and especially Germany, should spend more on defense, and we should continue to hold NATO members to the commitment they made at the Wales Summit to spend at least two percent of GDP on defense. But it is important to take note that European defense spending levels are rising and that European members of NATO along with Canada spend some \$300 billion a year on defense, in the process covering the bulk of the costs of the Alliance. The United States covers only about 20 percent of NATO's common budget and, although U.S. defense spending as a share of GDP is well above the NATO average, a relatively small portion of U.S. expenditure goes to European defense.

Even as we press our allies to spend more on defense, we should appreciate that more important than how much is spent is how defense dollars and euros are spent. There is far too much duplication and not nearly enough specialization within and across NATO. If NATO is to be a pool of resources that can meet challenges within and outside the treaty area, European countries must possess a range of capabilities along with the ability to get them there and sustain them once there. The European Union's ongoing efforts to reform its defense and procurement policy hold promise on this front.

As it seeks to increase and rationalize allied contributions to common defense, the United States cannot introduce uncertainty as to its commitment to NATO. Alliances are about collective defense, that an attack on any member, even the smallest and weakest, is an attack on all. Any doubt as to U.S. reliability will only encourage aggression and increase the inclination of countries to accommodate themselves to a stronger neighbor. A failure to respond to clear aggression against any NATO member would effectively spell the end of NATO. None of this is inconsistent with the reality that much of what NATO now does lies outside Article 5 and that we have to expect such undertakings will rarely if ever involve all members of the Alliance.

That Russia has emerged as a threat is not to argue for a one-dimensional policy toward that country. To be sure, we should push back where necessary, and not only with sanctions, when Russia violates a norm we hold to be central or puts at risk U.S. interests. But we should also be open to diplomacy and cooperation where possible and explore the potential of reviving the arms control dimension of the relationship.

NATO membership for either Ukraine or Georgia should be placed on hold. Neither comes close to meeting NATO requirements, and going ahead risks further dividing the alliance and adding military commitments that the United States is not in a position to fulfill. Beyond making good on the pledge to make the Republic of North Macedonia NATO's thirtieth member, the United States and NATO would be wise to focus on meeting existing obligations before taking on new ones.

The time has come to face reality and rethink our approach toward Turkey. What we are witnessing is the gradual but steady demise of a relationship; Turkey may be an ally in the formal sense but it is no partner. Nor is it a democracy. The Trump administration is right to have confronted Turkey over the detention of an American pastor, but its focus is too narrow and with tariffs it chose the wrong response. We should

reduce our dependence on access to Turkish military facilities, deny Turkey access to advanced military hardware like F-35s, and stand by the Kurds in Syria in the fight against ISIS. We may well have to wait out President Erdogan and seek to rebuild relations with Turkey once he no longer wields political power.

We would also be wise to rethink Afghanistan. There are situations in which ambition is called for. There are other situations in which even a modest course of action can prove to be ambitious. Afghanistan surely qualifies as an example of the latter given its internal divisions and Pakistan's provision of a sanctuary to the Taliban. We should design a policy around building governmental capacity, holding Kabul and the other major cities, and limiting the ability of terrorists to base themselves in the country. Extending governmental control over the whole of the country or creating conditions for peace are beyond reach. Afghanistan is better understood as a situation to be managed than a problem to be solved. This argues for a continued but sharply limited U.S. and NATO effort there.

NATO cannot survive much less thrive in a vacuum. It is part and parcel of the larger U.S.-European relationship. There is no economic or strategic justification for the sort of trade war the United States has launched. The overuse of sanctions and tariffs will set back U.S. economic and strategic interests alike. The EU is a friend, not a foe. European countries offer the best set of partners available to the United States for tackling global challenges ranging from how best to regulate cyberspace to mitigating and adapting to climate change to reforming the global trade system. They also remain an essential partner for containing Iran, a reality that argues for less unilateralism on our part and more coordination across the Atlantic.

I said at the outset of my remarks that we should be careful with assumptions. No one should assume European stability is permanent. To the contrary, history plainly shows that the last seventy years are more an exception than the rule. It should be the objective of the United States to extend this exception until it becomes the rule. A strong NATO in the context of a robust U.S.-European relationship is the best way to do just that.

Thank you again for this opportunity to meet with you today. I look forward to your comments and questions.