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At 70th Anniversary, NATO Must Return to Basics

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On April 4 and 5, the foreign ministers of the 29 members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), along with soon-to-be member Macedonia, will meet in Washington, DC, to mark the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

Seventy years later, Russia remains a threat to Europe's peace and stability. In recent years, Russia has used military force to change borders in Europe—something that has not happened since World War II. Since 2008, it has invaded two of its neighbors and it occupies thousands of square miles of territory in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Russia is re-arming its military, expanding in the Arctic, and threatening the Baltic states. As NATO looks toward the future, American leadership is needed to refocus NATO on the Alliance's core mission of territorial defense, increase defense spending, and keep NATO enlargement on the table for aspirant countries.

U.S. Interests in Europe

Some of America's oldest and closest allies are in Europe. The U.S. shares with this region a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy. Many of these ideas, the foundations on which America was built, were

brought over by the millions of immigrants from Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. During the course of the 20th century, millions of Americans have fought for a free and secure Europe.

A stable, secure, and economically viable Europe is in America's economic interest. For 70 years, NATO and the U.S. military presence in Europe have contributed to European stability, which has economically benefited both Europeans and Americans. The economies of Europe, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and Europe are each other's principal trading partners. The U.S. and Europe are each other's top source of foreign direct investment. All of this brings untold benefits to the U.S. economy and, by extension, the American worker. Without NATO, this would unlikely be possible.

Back to Basics for NATO

NATO was founded in 1949 with the mission to protect the territorial integrity of its members and—if required—defeat the Soviet Union. While NATO's members are no longer worried about the spread of communism, many current NATO members are certainly worried about protecting their territory from Russian expansion.

The United States needs a NATO that can deter aggression and defend the territorial integrity of its members. Everything else that NATO might do is secondary to this No. 1 mission of territorial defense.

The cornerstone of the NATO alliance is in its founding treaty, which states in Article 5 that an attack on one member is an attack on all members. Article 6 of the treaty states that Article 5 applies to “the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North

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America...on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.”

If NATO were to walk away from this commitment, there would be serious security consequences with significant economic implications. If history is any guide, within a generation, the U.S. could again be faced with the choice of sending hundreds of thousands of troops back across the Atlantic to fight a war in Europe to protect America’s interests. After winning the Cold War, this is not the legacy to pass on to the next generation.

In the 21st century, NATO needs to return to basics, with territorial defense as its primary goal. NATO does not have to be everywhere in the world doing everything all the time, and it should shy away from out-of-area military interventions. Rather, NATO needs to be capable of defending its members’ territorial integrity. If the U.S. deems a military intervention outside NATO’s area of responsibility necessary, it should be executed through a “coalition of the willing”—not through NATO.

Defense Is Not Cheap

As a collective security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its individual member states. Only a handful of NATO members can say that they are living up to their spending commitments. The U.S. is right to be concerned by this. However, there is nothing in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty that states that the Alliance’s security guarantee is conditional on a certain level of defense spending by its members.

Many European nations are starting to rebuild their defense capabilities after decades of consistent defense cuts following the end of the Cold War. Threat perceptions in many European capitals began to shift in 2014 after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. An increasingly acute threat perception, combined with consistent calls from the Trump Administration for higher defense spending in Europe, has resulted in real increases.

From 2017 to 2018, U.S. allies in NATO spent, in real terms, an additional 4 percent on defense.¹ Excluding the U.S., these increases resulted in an additional \$41 billion in defense investment from 2016 to 2018.²

Last year, seven of 29 NATO member states—Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the United States, and the United Kingdom—spent the required 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense commitment, the spending goal that was reaffirmed at the Wales Summit in 2014. Romania (1.92 percent) and France (1.82 percent) fell just below the threshold.³ While not enough NATO member states are meeting the 2 percent spending commitment, encouragingly a majority of nations (24) have plans in place to reach the 2 percent of GDP benchmark by 2024—a testament to shifting geopolitical realities, and, perhaps, reception of a very consistent U.S. message.⁴

Additionally, the number of member states meeting the pledge to spend 20 percent of their defense budgets on major equipment rose from 12 to 16 in 2018.⁵ Last year, 25 NATO allies spent more in real terms on equipment than they did the year before.⁶

The United States should continue to fulfil the leadership role in NATO, encouraging NATO allies to live up to their defense spending commitments and to continue to rebuild their oftentimes depleted capabilities. At the same time, the U.S. should recognize recent increases in defense spending among its Canadian and European allies. Attaining 2 percent and 20 percent, respectively, is for many nations a process, not a one-time event.

American Leadership Is Vital

In order to focus the Alliance on remaining effective for the next 70 years, the Trump Administration must:

- **Lead NATO back to basics.** NATO does not have to be everywhere doing everything. It does not

1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Secretary General’s Annual Report*, 2018, p. 34, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20190315_sgar2018-en.pdf (accessed March 27, 2019).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., Table 3.

4. Ibid., p. 34.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

have to become a global counterterrorism force or the West's main tool for delivering humanitarian aid. However, NATO does have to be capable of defending its members' territorial integrity per Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

- **Continuously state America's commitment to Europe.** President Trump should never miss an opportunity to reiterate that it is in America's best interest to remain actively engaged in NATO. Future Presidents should follow this message. A peaceful, stable Europe has led to economic, political, and military dividends that have had an immeasurable positive effect on the U.S.
- **Take a realistic approach to Russia.** So far, the Trump Administration's policies have been the toughest on Russia in a generation. Today, Russia in a 21st-century power with 19th-century imperial ambitions. Given the threat that Russia poses to Europe's stability, NATO is as important now as it was in 1949.
- **Commit unconditionally to America's NATO treaty obligations.** As long as the U.S. remains a member of the Alliance, it must be made clear to any adversary that an attack on one NATO member will, without question, be considered an attack on all. Any deviation from this commitment will only invite aggression.
- **Continue to press NATO allies on defense spending.** While the U.S. should acknowledge the consistent recent increases in defense spending by its NATO allies, far too few allies are living up to their defense spending commitments. America's leadership role in NATO means continuing to encourage allies to have a plan to live up to their defense spending commitments, and to maintain and increase the progress of recent years.
- **Keep NATO enlargement on the agenda.** NATO's open-door policy has been a crucial driver of modernization and reform in candidate coun-

tries, has promoted stability and peace in Europe, and has made it easier for the Alliance to coalesce around collective defense. The U.S. should continue to promote this important NATO policy and make it clear that Russia does not have an indirect veto over the process.

- **Call for the development of a new Strategic Concept.** A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the geopolitical and security challenges facing the Alliance, and the strategy that should be adapted to deal with these challenges. The last NATO Strategic Concept was published in 2010, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the so-called Arab Spring, the migrant crisis, and Russia's intervention in Syria. It is time for the Alliance to update the Strategic Concept for the London Summit in December 2019.
- **Encourage NATO to involve finance ministers.** There should be a special session for finance ministers (or their equivalent) at the next summit in London in December. In many parliamentary democracies, the finance minister controls public spending. Educating the finance ministers on the importance of military investment could help to secure more defense spending in the long term.

Looking to the Future

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has done more to promote democracy, peace, economic prosperity, and security in Europe than any other multilateral organization, including the European Union. It is essential that the U.S. continue to be an active participant in the Alliance's future and chart a course back to basics.

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