The Real Problems With NATO
What Trump Gets Right, and Wrong
By Jonathan Eyal

On February 17–19, NATO leaders gathered at the annual Munich Security Conference to reassert their commitments to mutual defense. For the Europeans, the conference provided the first up-close glimpse at the defense policies of U.S. President Donald Trump, who had previously dismissed NATO as “obsolete” and had expressed doubt that the future of the EU “matters much for the United States.” The conference also came shortly after U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis told European leaders that “Americans cannot care more for your children’s security than you do.”

Despite a tense atmosphere, both the Americans and the Europeans were on their best behavior in Munich: both U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed their continued commitment to the alliance. Yet the truth is that, renewal of vows notwithstanding, transatlantic relations are facing their greatest challenge in decades, with a resurgent Russia in the east, a European Union undergoing its biggest domestic crisis in decades, and a U.S. administration that is evidently impatient with its allies’ free-riding.
NATO needs reform. Washington’s recipe for what needs to be done, however, which largely consists of getting the Europeans to adhere to rigid defense spending targets, is similar to the obsessions of old Soviet economic planners—concerned with inputs rather than outputs. As a result, the Trump administration’s focus on burden-sharing obscures how NATO might really be made more effective, while inhibiting the development of a healthier U.S.-European defense relationship.

NOT SO FAST

The United States has long attempted to shame Europe into spending more on defense. In 2011, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that NATO faced a “dismal future” of “collective military irrelevance” unless its European members increased their financial contributions. The Trump administration’s complaints are thus largely accurate—the Europeans can and must do more to support the transatlantic alliance. In 2014, for instance, NATO member states pledged to increase their defense spending to two percent of GDP by 2024, but so far only Estonia, Greece, Poland, and the United Kingdom have reached that threshold. The Trump administration’s focus on burden-sharing obscures how NATO might really be made more effective. But although demands for greater burden-sharing identify a real problem, they also lead to a sterile debate which ultimately does nothing but frustrate defense planners on both sides of the Atlantic. The Europeans, for instance, are already doing more. New NATO member states such as Poland and Romania are increasing their military spending by
3.5 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively, the fastest rates in Europe. Last year Germany and France also promised to spend more, with both pledging a more modest five percent overall increase in defense expenditure between now and 2019. But even when European states have the necessary political will, their defense sectors often lack the capacity to absorb so much extra cash in a short period of time, since the time span required for procurement projects means that larger financial inputs take years before they are translated into real capability outputs. This imposes a severe time constraint on redressing the European “defense deficit,” which Washington simply fails to appreciate.

Consider Germany, Europe’s largest economy. To meet NATO spending targets, Berlin would have to raise the country’s annual defense budget to $65.8 billion, well above the $41.6 billion per year it is currently planning to spend by 2020. Building a political consensus to authorize such a gigantic leap would take time, as would creating the infrastructure to absorb such a financial expansion: the German defense ministry’s procurement office, for example, currently has a shortage of around 1,400 employees.

But even if the funds could be authorized, it is not so much the volume of spending that matters as how the money is spent. Greece meets the two-percent-of-GDP target, but wastes most of that money on maintenance, salaries, and pension liabilities rather than on building an effective fighting force. In short, banging the conference tables in an obsession with increased inputs is not going to speed up Europe’s military transformation. What Europe and America need, rather, is a broader and more mature approach to burden-sharing.
The defense ministers of (left to right) the Netherlands, Norway, and Germany at NATO headquarters in Brussels, February 2017.

PRACTICAL STEPS

The first step toward developing such an approach should be to finish implementing NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence plan, agreed upon at the 2016 Warsaw summit. The plan would strengthen NATO’s forward posture in eastern Europe through the deployment of four additional battalions, one in each of the three Baltic states and one in Poland, plus additional assets in Romania. The first deployments have
begun, but it remains to be seen whether all the troops committed by various countries will actually arrive, and if they do whether their presence will be enduring or simply consist of fleeting, periodic visits. If properly handled and implemented, however, NATO’s enhanced forward bases could result in a virtuous circle, generating a new and practical commitment on the part of both U.S. troops and European allies. This would provide active reassurance to the Europeans about the United States’ enduring military footprint on their continent, while also spurring the Europeans to invest more into their front-line troops—precisely what the White House wants them to do.

The Trump administration should also reiterate its commitment to the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), a $3.4 billion program, adopted in 2014 by the administration of Barack Obama, that is designed to strengthen the United States’ military presence in eastern Europe, upgrade its military facilities across the continent, and improve the interoperability of U.S. forces with those of the newer NATO members, such as Poland. The ERI is another classic case of a force-multiplier—a U.S. initiative that generates greater European capabilities, since it forces European nations to change their training programs, emboldens them to invest more into their logistical infrastructure, and provides them with an immediate incentive to maintain higher defense expenditure.

Finally, there is a need to revamp NATO’s antiquated and baroque decision-making structures, which are almost as much of a drag on the alliance’s efficiency as is the lack of adequate European capabilities. As things currently stand, decisions are slow and require unanimity, even in crises, and alliance members disagree with one another not only on what
to do in the event of a crisis but also on what the definition of a crisis should be. Meanwhile, NATO ambassadors are far more interested in representing that their government’s position is presented to their colleagues than they are in reaching any consensus. Russia is currently the greatest military threat to NATO, and today, most of the country’s military tactics are designed to take the alliance by surprise and exploit its inability to make quick decisions. These tactics include calling snap exercises (large military drills convened without prior notification) around its borders with Europe as well as the strategic concentration of missiles and other hardware to create “area-denial” bubbles, intended to prevent NATO forces from being able to reinforce the armies of its eastern member states.

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To counter these Russian tactics, NATO must streamline its command structure. Here again, the United States can lead. NATO’s supreme military commander is always a U.S. officer, and the United States should work on outlining a way to grant him the power to preemptively move NATO troops within alliance territory whenever defense planners consider it necessary. This is a reform, moreover, that can be achieved through simple dedication rather than through the allocation of fresh financial resources.

A NERVOUS TIME

Overshadowing all of NATO’s contemporary questions is, of course, the thorny issue of how precisely to *mix engagement*
with and deterrence of Russia. Even as Russian President Vladimir Putin has fueled war on Europe’s borders and attempted to interfere in the continent’s politics, Trump and his administration have indicated a willingness to work with—if not an outright admiration for—the Russian strongman. At Munich, Pence sought to reassure NATO allies that the United States would “continue to hold Russia accountable” for the illegal annexation of Crimea and for its role in stoking the civil war in Ukraine. At the same time, however, Pence said that Washington will continue to “search for new common ground” with Russia, which “President Trump believes can be found.”

Europeans are, generally speaking, not against a dialogue with Moscow. But they fear that Trump’s pursuit of détente could result in a deal negotiated above their heads. They also resent what appears to be the U.S. president’s belief that Russia is a potential ally in handling global crises, such as the fight against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). For no such cooperation is feasible as long as Moscow is “undermining national security for many allies [as well as] the international rules-based system,” as British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon put it in a hard-hitting speech last month.

Ultimately, the key problem facing transalantic relations is not merely the burden-sharing or the bureaucratic management of alliances but, rather, the fact that, for the first time since World War II, the United States is led by a president who appears to disregard the essential role that shared democratic values have historically played in cementing NATO, and who seems unaware, moreover, that for Europeans the challenge presented by Russia is not a passing difficulty that can be set aside in return for deals elsewhere in the world but is, and will remain, an existential challenge.
For the moment, European leaders have heard soothing words from the Trump administration. They have yet to be reassured by actions.