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Citizen Trump and the threat to NATO

The new US president's contempt for the transatlantic alliance will have repercussions the world over, whether he intends it or not

Days before becoming President, Donald Trump the private citizen took one last shot at Europe. In interviews with the German newspaper Bild and the British Times, he called NATO "obsolete", opined that the European Union was just a vehicle for German interests and said he had as much trust in Russian President Vladimir Putin as he did in German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It was the latest in a long-line of provocations aimed at the heart of America's historic alliance with the nations of Europe.

For this reason, the idea of a Trump presidency seemed an existential threat to the transatlantic alliance, and particularly to NATO. But now that Donald Trump is actually President, observers are asking a new question: do his various mad rantings on twitter as a private citizen mean anything?

NATO is an institution, a bureaucracy, and it has long hummed along at its daily business even as political tempests rage above its head. The U.S. government too is a bureaucracy, staffed with career civil servants, who were formed, even raised, on the notion that NATO is central to American security. Rhetoric aside, the ship of the American state turns slowly in practice and often simply outlasts the efforts of its temporary helmsmen to steer it. Even Trump's own cabinet picks for Secretary of State and Secretary of Defence defended NATO in their confirmation hearings, implying that their future boss's distemper on the subject was mere bluster.

So it is unlikely that Donald Trump has a purposeful plan for the end of NATO or, if he does, the personnel to carry it out. As with almost everything he does, Trump's approach to NATO seems more about negotiating tactics than geopolitical strategy. He has long viewed America's allies as poor relations who come to your house to borrow money and then spend the whole day frolicking in your pool. Central to his idea of putting America first is the notion that he will get a better deal

from U.S. allies and they will pay more for their defence. By belittling NATO and threatening to pull away American support if allies don't deliver, he hopes to scare them straight.

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And indeed there is some evidence that this tactic is working. One sees in Europe the first gentle stirrings of the need for increased spending on defence. This awakening results primarily of course from Russian aggression and Middle Eastern chaos, but also from the idea that the American security guarantee is not as reliable as previously thought.

Of course, American presidents have been pressing Europeans to share more of NATO's burdens since time immemorial (or at least since 1949). But previous US efforts to equalise the burden have always been based on the idea that Europe's security and prosperity are a core American interest and therefore must be protected—by Europe if possible, and by the United States if necessary. America, in essence, could never walk away. This meant that previous Presidents did not, as Trump has done, threaten to abandon Europe or refuse to come to its defence in the event of aggression.

The problem with this is that NATO, at its heart, is not about defence spending or burden-sharing, despite the thousands of mind-numbing conferences devoted to those topics over the decades. Rather it rests on solidarity — a sense that the nations of the transatlantic alliance can rely on each other in their moments of peril. NATO means that when you are attacked, your friends will be there unquestioningly, as America's NATO allies were when the United States was attacked on 11 September 2001. America's solidarity with Europe, in particular, is nearly the entire point of the alliance — to keep America involved in European security. Without American solidarity, NATO is an irrelevance.

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This means that Trump's questioning of America's loyalty to the NATO alliance will have geopolitical effects, whether he intends them or not. Europeans will increasingly return the disloyalty he has dished out and hedge against American abandonment. This may mean increased defence spending but it will also mean a progressive decoupling of US and European interests. In Europe's coming elections, mainstream politicians will feel free to openly disparage Trump and imply that tying

> Europe to Trump's foreign policy will undermine European values. Trump rarely takes kindly to such sleights and so we can expect many more transatlantic kerfuffles that will further erode solidarity.

NATO's enemies will not take long to notice that the alliance's essential strength, its solidarity, has weakened. Russia, in particular, may take the opportunity to put Article 5, NATO's solidarity clause, to the test, with some medium-level provocation against a NATO member. If a NATO member requests the invocation of Article 5 and Trump's America fails to respond, NATO will immediately become irrelevant, regardless of how much its members spend on defence.

This is just a thought exercise, but the larger point is that Trump can make NATO meaningless without ever consciously seeking to destroy it and without any help from his cabinet appointees or civil servants. Alliances require constant tending and they can die from neglect as easily as from malice.



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