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Trump's right about one thing: NATO IS obsolete

The military alliance is powerless when it comes to solving the problems currently facing Europe

So what does US President Donald Trump think about NATO? Twice during his campaign he rubbished the alliance publicly, saying it was "obsolete". Yet in early February when he met the UK's prime minister, Therese May, it was all hunky dory. He told her he supported NATO 100 percent.

There are some – a few – influential people who have argued that NATO is indeed obsolete. One of these was William Pfaff, the late, much esteemed, columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*. Another is Paul Hockenos who set out his views in a seminal article in *World Policy Journal*. Their words fell on deaf ears.

George H.W. Bush saw it differently and wanted to see the Soviet Union more involved in NATO's day-to-day work. Bill Clinton had another agenda – and one that turned out to be a dangerous one, triggering over time Russia's present day hostility towards the West – to expand NATO, incorporating one by one Russia's former east European allies. His successors continued that approach with Barack Obama at one time raising a red rag to a bull by calling for the entry into NATO of Ukraine and Georgia.

NATO's job, as the British secretary-general Lord Ismay said in 1967 was to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". It certainly had success with the latter two.

To some extent NATO did find a role after the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. It led humanitarian interventions in Bosnia in 1995 and against Serbia in 1999. In 2003 it deployed its troops into Afghanistan. At one time the NATO-led force rose to 40,000 for 40 countries, including all 27 of the NATO allies.

Nevertheless, there are some of us who don't see these as great successes.

A majority of historians who have examined the evidence are convinced that Stalin had no intention of invading Western Europe. The Second World War was won, the Soviet Union had a ring of friends around its borders, and Germany was divided. The allies had been an invaluable help-mate during it and it did not feel threatened by its former comrades-in-arms.

So often overlooked is that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of defeating Germany and lost by far the most fighting men and civilians. Thorough searches by Western historians through the Soviet archives – they were opened during the years of President Boris Yeltsin – have revealed that Moscow had no plans to invade Europe.

Today, despite its deployments in the former ex-Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, NATO is not a truly multilateral institution of equals. The Europeans do not initiate military action (with the exception of Libya that led to the overthrow and killing of President Muammar Gadhafi). It is the Americans who do that and the Europeans, whatever their reservations, invariably follow.

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Moreover, obeying America rather than following their own convictions in ex-Yugoslavia, the Europeans did not seek UN Security Council permission, and then are angry that Russia follows suit with its grabbing of Crimea.

NATO has no relevance to the problems that truly occupy Europe today. Its hands are tied in Ukraine; it has nothing to contribute to the massive refugee crisis; it cannot help deal with the fact, as a European Union study concluded, that there will be an increase in tensions over declining water supplies in the Middle East that will affect Europe's security and economic interests; nor can it do anything to contribute to the fight against global warming, in the long-run the most severe threat that confronts humanity.

When it comes to the "war on terrorism" there is little that NATO can do as a combined action force. At home each government deals with the issue itself. In the fight against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq the Americans, British, French and Russia battle them in their own way.

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and Asia. It is difficult to believe that otherwise sensible men and women in NATO countries believe they should have stayed on in Afghanistan after their original target – Al Qaeda, as the source of the terrorist act against New York's World Trade Centre – was driven out of Afghanistan and dealt a severe body blow.

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This was not in their UN mandate and it has led to America's longest war with no end in sight. It is a fruitless cause and the defeat of the Taliban by these means should never have been attempted. NATO countries should have limited themselves to building schools, hospitals, clinics, water supplies, sanitation systems and roads.

The EU should take over most of NATO's role: doing more of what it has done in Georgia and stabilising the Balkans, making use of its massive 'soft power' and thus undergirding world security. Yes, President Trump, NATO is obsolete!



Jonathan Power

Jonathan Power has been an international foreign affairs columnist for over 35 years. For 17 years he wrote a weekly column on foreign affairs for the *International Herald Tribune*. He has also been a frequent guest columnist for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.