



THE UNRAVELING OF THE

EU AND NATO

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Why NATO Matters and How to Revive It After Brexit

Does Great Britain's decision to leave (Brexit) presage the unraveling of the European Union? Can NATO survive Brexit? Or has NATO become too costly and obsolete? Does the election of Donald Trump spell the end of NATO or its revival?

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The United States should view with equanimity rather than alarm a scaling back of the EU's grandiose ambitions to achieve economic, political, and military integration. A return to a more modest, broad but not deep, pro-NATO, pro-American European Economic Community along the lines Margaret Thatcher traditionally advocated offers the best practicable solution for the EU's woes consistent with the long-term interests of the European democracies and the United States. Conversely, a robust NATO alliance remains vital to the United States and is easily affordable if underwritten with American power. Neither Brexit nor the European Union's troubles necessarily undermine NATO's existence or rationale. Instead, the main threat to NATO arises from the baleful consequences of the Obama administration's improvident strategy of "leading from behind": shrinking the American military as US adversaries build up theirs; putting distance between the United State and many of its democratic friends while conciliating revisionist, authoritarian, increasingly aggressive illiberal adversaries, including Putin's Russia; and embracing NATO's Trojan Horse of Turkey's increasingly Islamist, anti-Western trajectory under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The persistent unwillingness of Western European members of NATO to spend adequately on defense has compounded the damage to NATO that "leading from behind" has wrought.¹

What Donald Trump means for NATO is more hazardous to predict than with most presidents-elect. Trump has absolutely no foreign policy experience. Much of what candidate Trump said on the subject is contradictory, unclear, disturbing in some respects, reassuring in others. On one hand, his promise to build up the American military and increase defense spending substantially would contribute enormously to reviving the robustness of deterrence globally and in Europe that eight years of "leading from behind" has undermined. On the other hand, candidate Trump flaunted a disturbing propensity to denigrate the value of NATO and praise Vladimir Putin.² In the best case, Trump will come to recognize the virtues of NATO and the vices of Putin while delivering on his promise to restore American military preeminence with a generous margin to spare. The vindication of American interests rightly understood may depend on it.

Consider Brexit a manifestation of—and catalyst for—mounting, widespread, and justifiable dissatisfaction with the EU that its hapless response to the Syrian refugee crisis intensified at a critical moment. A plethora of recent events had demonstrated, even before Brexit, the



dysfunctional, unworkable, undemocratic, imperious institution the EU has become. The EU's sclerotic bureaucracy impedes innovation, stifles growth, and suppresses the legitimate expressions of nationalism essential for European dynamism, freedom, and enterprise. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and the introduction of the euro have exacerbated the divide between northern Europe and a southern European tier massively in debt and on the brink of financial collapse. The Schengen Agreement establishing the EU's open border policy will not and should not survive the hundreds of thousands of Syrians—some of them Islamists and security threats—descending on the member states. The feeble European Defense Community (EDC) cannot adequately substitute for an American-led NATO alliance. The EU has made the Obama administration look vigilant by comparison with its meek reaction to Putin's implacable determination to subvert Ukraine's independence as part of his grand strategy of reversing the outcome of the Cold War.³ Post-Brexit efforts of EU elites to isolate Britain and transform the EDC into an alternative to NATO will only make matters worse, distracting attention and energy from enacting reforms that reverse the EU's overweening pretensions to achieve complete economic, military, and political integration. Whether Brexit triggers constructive reform consistent with American ideals and self-interests depends upon what the United States, Great Britain, and the most powerful members of the EU choose to do and not do. Brexit does not necessarily signal the impending triumph of "Europe's galaxy of far right wing parties, from the French National Front to the People's Party Our Slovakia," which are xenophobic, authoritarian, and "deeply Anti-American."⁴ On the contrary, the pro-Brexit Conservative government of the United Kingdom has increased its contribution to securing NATO's northern and southern border, sending 800 soldiers and tanks into Estonia by the spring of 2017—the UK's largest military deployment since the Cold War.⁵ The Brexit vote also accords well with moving democratic Europe back in the direction of Margaret Thatcher's pro-American, pro-market, pro-nationalist, pro-NATO vision that better reflects the traditions, aspirations, and interests of all its members. This means, in the first place, encouraging "willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states" rather than centralizing power in Brussels in the hands of an undemocratic bureaucratic elite. This means, in the second place, policies stimulating markets and enterprise. This means, in the third place, a Europe economically and politically open to the world—particularly the United States—rather than protectionist. This means, above all, grounding Europe's defense in an American-led NATO to which Europe, according to Margaret Thatcher, owes its peace and prosperity since World War II. A neo-Thatcherite strategy offers a prudential middle ground between a dirigisme stagnant EU and a descent into xenophobic protectionism, nativism, and isolationism.⁶

The weakening of NATO during the Obama presidency poses a far greater threat to American interests and the security of democratic Europe than either a possible implosion or the scaling back of the European Union. Neither the EU nor NATO can substitute adequately for a preponderance of American military power and the will to lead it. Since 1914, Europe alone has failed to balance successfully against hegemonic threats arising from Kaiser Wilhelm's authoritarian Germany, Adolf Hitler's totalitarian Nazi Germany, or a totalitarian

Soviet Union until American power proved decisive to defeat them. Since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, democratic Europe has failed likewise to respond energetically and effectively to the rise of radical Islam in all its manifestations or to Putin's audacious gambit to stave off the decline and collapse of his increasingly repressive regime by imperial expansion. Witness the abject failure of Western European countries' attempts to stop Serbian atrocities in the Balkans during the 1990s or even provisionally end the Libyan civil war of 2011 without pleading for American military assistance, which proved decisive.

NATO and the European Union minus American power and resolve amount to substantially less than the sum of their parts. These entities suffer from what economists term a "collective action problem." NATO and the EU both consist of twenty-eight members with divergent interests and assessments of threats difficult to translate into a strong, coherent response without a dominant power taking the initiative such as the United States. Compounding the collective action problem, President Erdogan has moved Turkey in an increasingly Islamist, anti-Western, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic direction hostile to NATO's mission to uphold liberal values.⁷

Moreover, most European militaries are, in the mordant words of Raphael S. Cohen and Gabriel M. Schienmann, in "a pitiful state of decline"; only Greece, Estonia, and the United Kingdom spend NATO's goal of a mere 2 percent of GDP on defense. Even if the EU muddles through the endemic currency crises roiling southern Europe, economic stagnation, demographic decline, rising unassimilated Islamic populations, confiscatory taxation, mounting debt, and the inherent fiscal unsustainability of Western European social democracy will conspire against the EU or NATO replacing US military power.⁸

Consequently, Obama's strategy of leading from behind—shrinking the American military and resetting relations with Russia while putting distance between the United States and its democratic friends—has seriously weakened NATO, creating a dangerous power vacuum in Central Europe which Vladimir Putin's Russia strives implacably to fill.

Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, NATO's first secretary general, quipped that the alliance's goal was to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down. This remains no less true today, with emendations. The United States needs a muscular presence in Europe to keep Putin's authoritarian Russia out, Germany firmly anchored in the West, and Central Europe free from the tyranny of Russian imperialism. In many ways, Putin's regime more resembles the Soviet Union's in its calculation of cost and risk than it does Nazi Germany's. The audacity of Putin's Russia, like that of the earlier Soviet Union, compensates for its daunting internal weaknesses. By the early 1980s, a corrupt, repressive, expansionist, militaristic, economically stagnant Soviet Union became increasingly vulnerable to sustained pressure, which Ronald Reagan intensified comprehensively and decisively. The restoration of American military and economic power gave the Soviet Union little choice but to gamble on a reformer such as Mikhail



Gorbachev, who recognized that the Soviet Union could not compete against a self-confident United States unless it liberalized at home and pursued more conciliatory policies abroad.

Now Putin's demographically declining, economically languishing, intellectually stifling regime confronts a set of stark choices similar to the Soviet Union's during the 1980s.⁹ By pursuing a version of Ronald Reagan's strategy of vigilance—economically, politically, and militarily—the West would improve dramatically the chances of an autocratic Russian regime choosing benign reform rather than imperial expansion in a desperate, dangerous attempt to avert collapse.

Yet the Obama administration has done the opposite. The reset with Russia and the downsizing of the American military simultaneously sowed doubts in the minds of our most reliable NATO allies in Eastern Europe about American capability and resolve while enabling Putin's strategy of playing a weak hand strongly to reverse the outcome of the Cold War. As President Obama shrinks the military budget, Russia has engaged in its largest military buildup since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Russia's comparatively small, stagnant, and corrupt economy might not be able to afford Putin's ambitions to restore Russian military might. The defense analyst Ariel Cohen warns, however, that the generous margin of US military superiority on which the credibility of deterrence depends is rapidly and significantly declining as Russia and China strengthen their militaries prodigiously.¹⁰ The National Defense Panel Report on the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review concludes somberly that the combination of the Russian buildup and the US build-down calls "into question" previous assumptions that "Europe is a net producer of security."¹¹

The 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New Start) between the United States and Russia that Obama acclaimed as a landmark achievement delivered another heavy blow to the credibility of deterrence and US security guarantees to its NATO allies. New Start highly favored Moscow, requiring the United States to build down its arsenal of intercontinental nuclear missiles while allowing the Russians—substantially under the limit—to build up theirs. Worse, New Start impedes robust research, development, and deployment of ballistic missile defense, which the Obama administration has slashed—heedless that effective ballistic missile defense is imperative for restoring the credibility of US commitment to its allies globally, including NATO.

The Obama administration's indifference to maintaining American military preponderance derives from the president's false assumption at the core of his reset with Russia; i.e., that Putin was a partner for peace in Europe as well as the Middle East rather than a geopolitical adversary striving to displace American power in both regions. Since Putin began his campaign to reduce Ukraine to a vassal state in late 2013, doubts in Eastern Europe about American capability, strategic clarity, and resolve have soared because of the president's unyielding opposition to any vigorous American or NATO response. The governments of Poland and Lithuania have become more dubious than ever that the United States would really risk war with Russia to defend them.

Even so, President Obama has resisted all calls—including from a growing number of his advisers—for providing arms to Ukraine so it can defend itself against relentless Russian subversion. Obama has resisted all calls for imposing sanctions with teeth on Russia’s banking and energy sectors—the only types capable of imposing significant costs on Putin’s regime. He refuses to reverse his decision to cancel the deployment of missile defense in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary that so alarmed and demoralized these staunchly pro-American Eastern European allies. In a triumph of hope over experience, Obama and his secretary of state, John Kerry, refuse to abandon the reset, despite Putin’s predations not only in Ukraine but in the Middle East, bolstering the murderous Assad regime in Syria as part of his grand scheme to have Russia replace the United States as the dominant power in the region.

Alas, Donald Trump’s pre-campaign, pro-Putin, anti-NATO rhetoric does not inspire confidence that he understands the high stakes involved in the outcome of Ukraine’s struggle to remain free and become part of the West. In his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski foresaw presciently why Putin would consider Russian domination of Ukraine pivotal for achieving his grand design, mutually exclusive with US interests and our NATO allies: “Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian Empire . . . However, if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with . . . major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia.”¹² In the short term, Putin’s aim is to humiliate NATO, demonstrate its impotence, and convince Russia’s neighbors that the Russian army can intervene anywhere in the region without fear of reprisal. Ultimately, Putin is inclined to expand and repress rather than retrench and reform. The United States and the European Union collectively have the preponderance of resources to stop Putin in his tracks in Ukraine and beyond. The US GDP exceeds Russia’s by a factor of more than seven. The European Union’s GDP exceeds Russia’s by a slightly greater margin. Instead, the United States and NATO sorely need a massive infusion of strategic clarity and political will.

That entails rebuilding America’s military, including an energetic program of research, development, and deployment of ballistic missile defense, increasing the size of the US Navy to 350 ships, and spending at least 4 percent of the GDP on defense. That entails envisaging Putin’s illiberal Russia as an enemy requiring muscular deterrence in Europe and the Middle East. That entails bolstering democratic allies, not only in Europe but in East Asia, where an increasingly illiberal and assertive China seeks to achieve hegemony—by far the world’s paramount regional power center for the twenty-first century. That entails abrogating the feckless Iran nuclear deal that facilitates the militant, aggressive, anti-American, anti-Semitic regime’s determination to cross the nuclear threshold.

The erosion of American power and influence—not the fate of the EU—constitutes the prime danger to the interests of the United States and its democratic allies in Europe and beyond. A Clinton victory in the 2016 presidential election would have resulted in a veritable Obama



third term, broadening and deepening this erosion, further lowering the barriers to aggression everywhere. For all the legitimate doubts about Donald Trump, the most felicitous elements of his economic and military agenda offer at least a decent chance of restoring a generous margin of American military preeminence and American prosperity, on which America's indispensable role as the world's default power depends. Hope fervently that his wisest advisers, among them the strategically sound and steady Vice President-elect Mike Pence, bring out the better angels of Trump's political nature.

NOTES

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