

NATO Solidarity?

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Donald Trump's remarks about NATO over the last year, as with so many other issues, have been both colourful and unpredictable. But his remarks about NATO have had the distinction of directly affecting the international security environment. Even the speed with which he has shifted positions has tended to undermine the fundamentals of deterrence which, for over a generation, have prevented war between the great powers. With the NATO Summit on 25 May 2017 in Brussels, there is an opportunity to get the US and its Allies back on the same page regarding collective defence and security. There is also the opportunity for Canada to take the lead on an issue that builds on our particular expertise in peace-building.

Trump's Criticisms

Soon after being elected, President Trump repeated his long-held view that NATO was "obsolete" because it was not addressing such real threats as international terrorism. By this he meant that NATO was not combatting ISIS in Iraq and Syria. At the time, many pundits also wondered if he thought NATO was obsolete because he believed that Russia in particular no longer posed a threat to the West. On this point, he has wavered, perhaps

because his Secretary of Defence and others in his Administration have been so outspoken about Russian actions in the Crimea and elsewhere in Ukraine.

In any event, Trump recently indicated that he had changed his view. During his press conference with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, on 12 April, Trump said that NATO was no longer obsolete because it had listened to him and was now fighting terrorism. But what exactly had transpired between his inauguration and the press conference, and of such magnitude that it changed his mind, is far from clear, — because nothing changed with NATO at all.

Secondly, Trump has regularly questioned the reality of NATO solidarity. How can there be solidarity when only five Allies were paying their "fair share," meaning national defence budgets of 2% of GDP? The argument here is that all Allies should share the financial burden of providing for collective defence. For years, Allies have agreed that the target of 2% would generate the capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any conceivable threat from outside NATO. Before the election last November, Trump even suggested that the US would only come to the defence of those Allies who had met

their “funding obligations.”

On this point, Trump has not changed his views. During that same press conference with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, Trump said, “we must also ensure that NATO members meet their financial obligations and pay what they owe. Many have not been doing that.” Presumably, “what they owe” means a defence budget that equals 2% of GDP. However there were reports that during Trump’s bilateral meeting with Chancellor Merkel, on 17 March, he asked Germany not only to increase its defence budget to the 2% target, but also to pay arrears for the years when its defence budget was below that target. (Pay whom was not clear.) This apparently explained the rather frosty press conference that followed their bilateral meeting. “What they owe,” therefore, may mean a defence budget equalling 2% of GDP, plus the shortfall from years of “underpayment.”

How are we to interpret Trump’s remarks on this issue? Interestingly, the comments made by leading figures within the US Administration have all been fairly consistent. In February, US Defence Secretary Mattis said at a NATO defence ministers meeting in Brussels that the US would “moderate” its commitment to Allies who did not increase defence spending and expected a plan by the end of the year to get all Allied defence budgets up to 2% of GDP. Shortly afterwards, at the Munich Security Conference, US Vice-President Pence said, “the United States of America strongly supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment to this transatlantic alliance. We’ve been faithful for generations — and as you keep faith with us, under President Trump we will always keep faith with you.” At an April meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, Secretary of State Tillerson said he supported Secretary Mattis on this issue.

In other words, all of the comments have either explicitly (Trump, Mattis) or implicitly (Pence, Tillerson) established a link between the defence spending by individual Allies and the willingness of the US to come to the defence of those Allies if they are attacked. This *quid pro quo* has been fairly consistent across the new Administration, generating a fair amount of anxiety, especially among those

exposed to Russian intimidation, such as the Baltic States and Poland.

Exactly What Constitutes Fair Burden-Sharing?

The arguments about fair burden-sharing within the Alliance are long-standing. And what constitutes fair burden-sharing has been a topic of debate since NATO was founded in 1949 with the signing of the Washington Treaty. However what is new about President Trump’s comments is the suggestion that the collective defence clause in the Washington Treaty, Article V, is conditional on whether the US believes a given Ally is paying its “fair share.”

You would be forgiven for thinking that such conditionality would abrogate the Washington Treaty. Does not Alliance solidarity, as captured by the Treaty, mean basically “one for all and all for one”? In fact Article V is not that clear cut. It says that an attack against one Ally will be considered to be an attack against them all, and that each Ally will assist the party so attacked by taking such action *as it deems necessary* (my italics) to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. In other words, we do not find in Article V the kind of automaticity that binds one Ally to commit fully to the defence of another. True, the intent is clear, and there is arguably a political obligation among Allies to come to the defence of any Ally attacked. But there is some wiggle room for Allies to decide how they would assist if called upon by the treaty to do so.

This potential wiggle room in the collective defence clause is all the more worrying when one takes General Mattis’ comment into consideration, that the US might “moderate its commitment” if Allies did not increase defence spending. General Mattis is a former strategic commander of NATO, so when he talks about moderating the US commitment, he seems to imply that the US could use the wiggle room provided by Article V to moderate their defence of an Ally that was attacked. That interpretation would be consistent with President Trump’s comments.

This is significant for a number of reasons.

First, it interprets the Washington Treaty in a way that is startling new, especially coming from the US. And what is good for the goose might also be good for the gander. In other words, other Allies, in a crisis, might also be tempted to *moderate* their commitment to collective defence, especially those distant from the front line with Russia. Or those who do not see Russia as a threat, such as Marine Le Pen.

Second, the US, since WWII, has traditionally characterized itself as a “European Power,” meaning that what goes on in Europe has a direct impact on the US, particularly in the security sphere. The US would therefore always have an interest in European security, and would always be present in Europe to protect that interest. The new formulation of collective defence by the Trump Administration suggests that the US no longer considers itself a European power, no longer seeing vital interests there. If our European friends have been waiting for an invitation for the European Union to build an independent defence capability, this is it.

Third, by stating in public that the US might not rush to the defence of *all* Allies, it can be argued that the Administration has made the world more dangerous literally overnight. NATO solidarity, and the repeated profession of that solidarity, has been the essential ingredient in Alliance deterrence. By showing a common front, NATO deters potential adversaries from taking action against a weaker or more vulnerable Ally. By the sheer fact of solidarity, of shared commitment to collective defence, you achieve a military effect. In other words, deterrence saves you from going to war and the costs associated with that. President Trump’s comments, by undermining deterrence, has made the North Atlantic region more insecure. And, paradoxically, increased the need for defence spending because of it.

This is not to say that defence spending by Allies is not an important issue. True solidarity among Allies means not only coming to the aid of an Ally that is attacked. It also means being capable of providing military assistance to that Ally in the first place.

Article V is meaningless unless each Ally provides for its own defence and also prepares to assist other Allies who are attacked, often at a distance.

What Exactly is Defence Spending?

So, fourth, what is defence spending, and should a straightforward commitment to increase our defence spending to 2% of GDP satisfy both the US and the demands of Allied solidarity? This is where the debate over percentages does not always lead to better defence. The first question is what really constitutes defence spending. What nations include in their definition of defence varies; for some, the definition is fairly broad. For example, do you include national police forces, when they have a paramilitary capability? Other countries seem more intent on simply getting young men off the street and into barracks, almost like a social program, than on creating a real defence capability that is useful to the Alliance.

For some of the bigger Allies, including the US, defence spending is a form of economic stimulus: the US spends significant amounts on the acquisition of military equipment manufactured in various US congressional districts, where job creation is an important political factor. This finds a parallel in the funding and siting of military bases across the US. For countries like Canada, procurement often means buying equipment made elsewhere, so the domestic economic impact of defence spending is less. Additionally, more spending by Allies on defence typically means more spending on US-made defence equipment. So the US call for more spending by Allies has both a security and an economic rationale.

However, even when Allies spend their defence dollars on real defence capabilities, including troops and equipment, those capabilities need to be deployable. They need to be able to get from their own territories to the territory of an Ally that is attacked. If not, the defence spending in question is irrelevant in terms of the Allied commitment to collective defence. The reality is

that much in the way of defence capabilities possessed by individual Allies is not deployable at distance. Hence the percentage of GDP spent on defence by those Allies is a poor measure of solidarity. Canadian spending on defence has always emphasized the deployability of high-end capabilities, whether equipment or troops. Though we may only spend approximately 1% of GDP on defence, that spending is all gold when it comes to our commitment to collective defence.

Even when individual Allies possess defence capabilities that can be deployed at distance, those capabilities do not count for much if they are not *willing* to deploy them. In short, having a big defence budget and significant capabilities is one thing; having the political will to commit them to operations is something else. Like deployability, political will cannot be measured by the percentages of GDP spent on defence.

The fact is, when NATO has undertaken peace support or combat missions, Canada has been at the forefront of those few Allies willing to commit fully to operations. We were there with a battle group in SFOR in Bosnia in the 1990s. During the Kosovo air campaign in 1999, not only was Canada prepared to undertake the bombing missions to halt the Serbian regime's ethnic cleansing (only a handful of Allies were prepared to do so), we led most of the bombing runs, after the US. We were also one of only a few Allies that committed troops and equipment to help stabilize Macedonia in the early 2000s.

All Canadians know of our commitment to Kandahar Province in Afghanistan — one of the most difficult missions in NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). We succeeded in that mission, but at a significant cost in terms of casualties and funding over a decade. Canada fought without putting caveats on what we were prepared to do or the risks we were prepared to take in order to achieve Allied objectives, unlike others whose defence budgets were higher. Again, during NATO's 2011 air campaign to protect Libyan civilians from a tyrannical regime, among only a few Allies, Canada undertook the bombing missions when the US elected not to.

When the chips are down, it is safe to say that our US friends would prefer to have Canadians at their shoulder than some other countries whose GDP percentages may be better.

In other words, the percentage target for defence spending is a poor measure of both Allied capabilities and of the political will to commit to difficult operations. The Alliance needs to come up with a more sophisticated measure of defence *capability and commitment*.

A Commitment to Spend More?

If the question is whether Canada should be spending more on defence, the short answer is yes. Of course there are other priorities in government, but the world is not becoming safer. As old equipment needs to be replaced, we face significant defence capability challenges in the years ahead. The current defence review should set out how the government will meet those challenges. Hopefully it will include a modest but long-term commitment to increase defence spending.

Such a commitment would be broadly in line with the pledge made by leaders at the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014: "Taking current commitments into account, we are guided by the following considerations: Allies whose current proportion of GDP spent on defence is below (2% of GDP) will:

- halt any decline in defence expenditure;
- aim to increase defence expenditure in real terms as GDP grows;
- aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets and filling NATO's capability shortfalls."

Though it is unlikely Canada will reach 2% of GDP spent on defence by 2024, we could demonstrate how increased spending will enable us to meet our NATO capability targets and help fill NATO's capability shortfalls.

Even so, meeting defence spending targets is

irrelevant if Allies are not equipping themselves to meet the threats of the 21st century. Adapting to new risks is something that NATO has done well. After the post-1989 collapse of the communist bloc, many asked whether NATO was still relevant. Yet NATO did two things it had never done before: it embarked on operations out of theatre (in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, etc.); and it developed partnership arrangements with countries to the East and to the South as a way of projecting stability into tumultuous regions, including the Middle East. Canada has regularly been at the forefront of these new stability initiatives, protecting civilians caught in the midst of conflict.

This is why President Trump's claim that NATO was obsolete because it did nothing about terrorism was so surprising, — as was his recent claim that NATO "is now fighting terrorism." The fact is that NATO has been actively combating terrorism for over 15 years. In the aftermath of 9/11, Allies redefined Article V, so that an attack on an Ally by international terrorists would also trigger the collective defence clause. In the days after 9/11, NATO declared Article V for the first and only time in its history. This is why so many Allies joined the US to fight the Taliban and Al Qaida in Afghanistan, and why that mission was eventually taken over by NATO. ISAF was at its core a counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency mission. President Trump's initial claim that NATO did not fight terrorism was incorrect; some of his views about NATO have finally caught up with reality.

NATO remains relevant for another reason. Russia today poses a direct threat to NATO Allies, especially those bordering Russia. The Putin regime has shown that, for the first time since WWII, a European power is prepared to invade another country in order to acquire territory. Nor is it only bordering states at risk. The Russian regime has also refused to negotiate a reduction in short-range nuclear weapons, retaining somewhere in excess of 4,000 of these. And it only recently deployed a new intermediate-range cruise missile that abrogates the INF Treaty. These actions directly threaten our European Allies. Not only is NATO not obsolete, it is more relevant than ever.

This is why deterrence matters. By all means, let's discuss defence spending among Allies. That will also help us refine the measures to assess the true defence capabilities of individual countries. But let's have that discussion behind closed doors.

The same argument applies to the collective defence clause of the Washington Treaty. It is a serious mistake to say, publicly, that Article V may not mean what we all thought it meant since 1949. We and our adversaries assumed that an attack on one Ally would mean that the other members of the Alliance would automatically come to its defence. Implying that this might not be so could lead adversaries to test our resolve, to destabilize neighbours, to risk conflict in order to seize territory, and to stoke nationalism at home. Furthermore, the suggestion of wiggle room in our commitment to collective defence could lead other Allies, in a crisis, to hesitate to defend a fellow member state. All Allied leaders need to re-commit, publicly and without caveat, to collective defence at the NATO Summit this May.

As for the specific issue of ISIS, NATO has been involved in training and capacity building in Iraq since 2004, and a range of activities continue under an Individual Partnership and Co-operation Programme with Iraq. If President Trump is implying that NATO should do more than training by becoming involved in the military operation supporting Iraqi forces, then he should propose this within NATO.

A Canadian Initiative for the Brussels Summit

There is, however, one initiative in the fight against terrorism that Canada could lead in the run-up to the NATO Summit in May. NATO has been involved in a variety of peace support and combat missions in the Balkans, North Africa, and Afghanistan. But there is one common element — the need to train local forces to take over security responsibilities when our forces withdraw. Rather than "reinventing the wheel" by setting up yet another *sui generis* NATO training mission in country X, Y, or Z, why not establish a NATO

command dedicated to training local forces. In fact, training local forces is the only exit strategy we have in winding down a NATO mission, and a training command would help retain institutional memory.

Canada should take the lead in proposing the creation of such a NATO command because of our proven track-record within NATO in providing the best training mission in Afghanistan. Training local forces is something Canadians do remarkably well.

Canada has a lot at stake in making NATO an effective organization. When faced with an international security crisis, a NATO mission, as opposed to a “coalition of the willing” led by the US, has distinct advantages for Canada. In a NATO mission, all Allies are at the table when important policy decisions are made regarding the conduct of the operation. In a “coalition of the willing,” Washington tends to make the key decisions. NATO missions are obviously the preferred option for countries like Canada.

The challenge for Canada, and for other Allies, in the run-up to the May NATO Summit, is to demonstrate to the new US Administration how our defence spending supports the role of the Alliance, and how that role is evolving to take account of new threats.

This should not be a difficult task, especially when we have strong advocates for NATO in our court, such as the new US Secretary of Defence, General Mattis. As NATO’s Strategic Commander for Transformation, Mattis wrote to me when I was Canada’s Ambassador to NATO, supporting the importance that I placed on Alliance solidarity, and the need to compromise national prerogatives in order to maintain that solidarity at all costs.

I have no doubt that, ultimately, the new US Administration, including President Trump, will come to value solidarity as much as previous Administrations. In the meantime, Canada should be at the forefront of those countries confidently and publicly committed to the essentially transatlantic core of our collective security.