



# An Alliance in Crisis

## Europe Needs to Act Quickly to Defend Itself

By Max Bergmann

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President Donald Trump's European trip has thrown the trans-Atlantic alliance into crisis. The president's unwillingness to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the NATO treaty—that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all—not only has revealed that America has become an unreliable ally but also has cast doubt on the integrity of NATO's Article 5 and therefore the alliance itself. This is incredibly dangerous, as Europe is facing a clear and present security threat from the Russian Federation.

Weakness invites aggression, and President Trump's disdain for the alliance, as well as his apparent desire to appease Russia by removing sanctions,<sup>1</sup> is practically inviting Russian President Vladimir Putin to test the strength of America's Article 5 commitment. For the past 70 years, Europe has relied on America to guarantee its security, but should Putin instigate a security crisis, Europe will not be able to count on a Trump-led America to deter Russia or to come to Europe's aid. Europe may now be on its own. Yet in this volatile and dangerous geopolitical moment, Europe is presently not ready or able to ensure its own defense. It needs to act fast.

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### A crisis of omission

The NATO summit meeting in Brussels on Thursday, May 25, was expected to be uneventful. More a meet and greet than a summit, the day was designed to showcase the alliance and provide a forum for the new American president to end any doubt about his commitment to NATO—and to affirm finally his commitment to the alliance's foundational Article 5 provision. But after much buildup, President Trump never mentioned the U.S. commitment to Article 5, leaving our NATO allies stunned.

Trump's omission was not just a flub by a novice, uninformed, and ill-prepared president who has made a nonstop string of bizarre decisions since taking office. The day before arriving in Brussels, the administration explicitly told *The New York Times* that Trump would reaffirm America's commitment to Article 5 during the summit.<sup>2</sup> The following

day, Trump read a speech from prepared text that never mentioned Article 5. The reaction to the omission was immediate and negative, prompting national security adviser H.R. McMaster to claim that Trump’s affirmation of Article 5 was implied in his speech.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the furor, there was no effort from the president himself to set the record straight, even though he had any number of opportunities to do so over the course of the summit. If this was an unintentional slight, it is one of the worst diplomatic gaffes in recent memory, demonstrating a shocking level of incompetence. However, given the president’s past disparaging statements about NATO—including describing it as “obsolete”;<sup>4</sup> the unwillingness of the United States to even discuss Russia during the summit; the president’s persistent and unrelenting praise of Putin; and the growing scandal surrounding the Trump campaign’s potential collusion with Russia—it is almost impossible to view Trump’s omission as anything but intentional.

While failing to mention a standard diplomatic declaration may not seem earth shattering, diplomacy is rooted in the routine. Nicholas Burns, former top State Department official in the George W. Bush administration, noted in a tweet that, “Every US President since Truman has pledged support for Article 5—that [the] US will defend Europe. Not so Trump today at #NATO.”<sup>5</sup> When language and actions significantly deviate from the norm, countries take note and alter their behavior and policies accordingly.

The fallout from Trump’s visit may have caused a paradigm shift in Europe. In a speech in Munich on May 27, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “The era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent ... That’s what I experienced over the past several days. ... We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands ... we have to know that we Europeans must fight for our own future and destiny.”<sup>6</sup> European historian Anne Applebaum noted that “everything really has changed ... As a result of this trip, American influence ... is at its rockiest in recent memory.”<sup>7</sup> Former U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO Ivo Daalder explained that, “This seems to be the end of an era.”<sup>8</sup>

President Trump’s unwillingness to affirm his support for the alliance and his outward disdain for our democratic European allies also puts America on a road to isolation. Our allies in Europe are key pillars of the liberal global order: They fight alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan and against the Islamic State, they are the largest providers of foreign aid in the world,<sup>9</sup> and they hold tremendous global diplomatic and economic weight. Europe is critical to almost every global effort and is our most important global partner. By burning bridges and eroding trust among our allies, Trump has isolated America.

But even more troubling is that Trump’s omission projects tremendous weakness. NATO’s Article 5 commitment is built on the fundamental trust that members will be there for each other, in that an attack on one NATO member is treated as an attack on all. If this commitment is demonstrated as hollow—especially from the United States,

the most powerful and important NATO member—the alliance loses its credibility and thus its ability to deter adversaries. Russia, which sees NATO as its primary geopolitical threat, has been actively seeking to erode the trust underpinning the alliance. It has used disinformation campaigns to undermine support for NATO within European member countries.<sup>10</sup> In some of NATO’s smaller, poorer, Eastern European member countries, the Kremlin has used its financial and energy resources to gain influence and leverage. It has used corruption as a tool of influence in these countries, using its network of oligarchs to corrupt and, in effect, capture elite decision-makers; this has given Russia a degree of leverage over these countries, giving it an ability to affect NATO decision-making from within.<sup>11</sup> These efforts have threatened NATO’s cohesiveness at the margins, but a weak commitment from the United States is a potential geopolitical game-changer for Russia.

Following the disastrous summit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg tried to soothe concerns by pointing out that the “facts on the ground are the strongest possible commitment to the alliance.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, U.S. engagement with NATO has looked like business as usual—with U.S. deployments, trainings, exercises, and routine diplomatic and military cooperation with NATO proceeding apace. But what should terrify Europeans is not whether U.S. officials fail to show up at a NATO meeting but whether President Trump fails to show up in a crisis.

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### The 3:00 a.m. phone call

The threat facing Europe is not theoretical—it is clear and present. Russia may be content for the next few months to undermine Europe from the inside by meddling in the upcoming German elections, as it did in the French, Dutch, and, of course, U.S. elections.<sup>13</sup> But should these Russian efforts fall short, as they did in France and the Netherlands, Trump’s weak commitment to NATO is practically begging to be tested. This does not require Putin to launch a massive invasion to undercut NATO; he just needs to expose NATO as a paper tiger unwilling to defend itself.

To test Trump’s commitment to Article 5, Putin could provoke a Gulf of Tonkin-like crisis. This could materialize in many different ways. Russia could try to instigate a border skirmish or an incident over the treatment of the Russian minority in one of the Baltic states.<sup>14</sup> It could create a dispute over Russian access to Kaliningrad, its enclave inside NATO territory, either at sea or over its rail links through Lithuania.<sup>15</sup> It could intensify its violations of EU and NATO airspace and maritime space,<sup>16</sup> inviting a shoot-down incident similar to the one in Turkey in 2015.<sup>17</sup> It could seek to create a direct military incident by, for instance, directing Russian aircraft to fly dangerously close to NATO ships and aircraft with the intention of provoking an engagement.<sup>18</sup> Russia could even choose to target not a NATO member but rather a non-NATO EU country such as Finland or Sweden, ostensibly absolving Trump of any formal obligation to respond.<sup>19</sup>

While instigating a crisis is risky, Russia has become increasingly brazen. In October 2016, Russia attempted a coup to kill the prime minister of Montenegro in a desperate effort to stop the country from joining NATO.<sup>20</sup> Russia's interference in European and U.S. elections was also transparent, as Russian hackers barely concealed their efforts, leaving behind clear "fingerprints."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Putin has demonstrated a willingness to seize opportunities when they arise. Following the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, Putin moved immediately to seize Crimea.<sup>22</sup> As Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime, Russia's main client in the Middle East, was losing ground to the Syrian opposition in fall 2015, Putin surged Russian military forces into Syria to bolster Assad and turn the tide of the war.<sup>23</sup> Trump's meek commitment to NATO, combined with his efforts to appease Russia, may be seen by Putin as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strike a severe blow to NATO and the trans-Atlantic alliance.

However a crisis materializes, the moment of truth will likely come following an incident in which Putin makes that "3:00 am phone call" to Trump. On the call, Putin could claim any or all of the following: that Russia was attacked; that the U.S. intelligence services are anti-Russian and cannot be trusted; that this incident does not concern America and is bilateral in nature; that Russia's response will be limited and proportional; and that America should stay out. The critical question then becomes: Will Trump respond to Putin by reaffirming U.S. commitment to Article 5 and warning Putin that an attack on any NATO ally will be treated as an attack on the United States that will be met with an American military response? Or will Trump acquiesce and appease Putin? If Trump is unwilling to commit publicly to Article 5 in a speech directly to NATO allies, there is little reason for Europe to trust that Trump will be willing to do so privately over the phone to Putin.

Many have hoped that Trump's appointment of experienced military professionals, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis and national security adviser McMaster, would help steer Trump away from destabilizing policy approaches. But they have thus far failed when it comes to Europe and Russia. There is also almost nothing they, or the American national security bureaucracy, can do to countermand an order from the president to stand down in the event of a military crisis. If America does not act in the event of a Russian attack on a NATO member, even if that attack is extremely limited, the alliance will almost assuredly collapse. Lack of American engagement or participation would paralyze NATO and its European members in their attempts to coordinate a response. And in the wake of NATO inaction, Eastern European and Baltic states, who are the most directly threatened by Russia, could change their foreign policies to hedge vis-à-vis Russia. With NATO paralyzed, these countries could determine that to survive, they must mollify Russia. As a result, the Kremlin could gain immense leverage over eastern NATO and EU states and, given the nature of collective decision-making of NATO and the European Union, this could provide Russia great influence over the future direction of Europe.

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## Europe must act

Europe must act immediately to ensure that it can defend itself without the help of the United States. Acknowledging this reality is painful for any committed trans-Atlanticists, but with Trump as president, the United States can no longer be relied upon as the guarantor of European security.

Many will question whether Europe can, in fact, defend itself without America. But let's be clear: Europe has the ability to defend itself; it simply has not had to. President Trump's harsh lecturing of our European allies on defense spending<sup>24</sup> may have been boorish, but the underlying message was also one delivered by former presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush.<sup>25</sup> The European Union has 500 million people, its economy is the largest in the world,<sup>26</sup> and it is wealthy and technologically advanced. Collectively, European forces can right now, on paper, bring to bear conventional combat power comparable to Russia's. To defend itself, Europe does not need to destroy its social model or transform its economy; it does, however, need to act.

First, Europe must work quickly to harden potential soft targets and increase vigilance. Some European states are doing exactly this. Sweden, for instance, placed troops on the strategic and undefended island of Gotland last summer and has recently brought back the draft.<sup>27</sup> Baltic states have procured Javelin missiles, which are advanced anti-tank weapons that would hinder a Russian advance.<sup>28</sup> NATO deployments to the east and to the southeast have bolstered European defenses and ensured that an attack on one of the Baltic states would result in casualties from countries across NATO, adding to the deterrent value of these forces.<sup>29</sup>

However, more must be done to increase readiness, prepare European publics, and protect infrastructure over the next six months. There are steps that Europe should take immediately to address short-term deficiencies. European countries urgently need to assess the state of their forces and should prioritize addressing the most immediate and egregious readiness shortfalls that inhibit their ability to "fight tonight." This includes focusing on immediate force readiness challenges—manning shortfalls and maintenance deficiencies in vehicle and aviation fleets, as well as rushing procurements to address shortfalls in critical equipment such as precision-guided munitions, artillery, and other systems needed in a near-term contingency.

Second, Europe needs to take steps to ensure that it can fight effectively without America. To do so, Europe should accelerate the creation of an EU military command to ensure that it has the ability to fight in a coordinated manner independently of NATO. While such a command has long been opposed by NATO and the United States, the opposition is outdated and counterproductive. Should Trump refuse to intervene in a crisis, NATO would be paralyzed, and its integrated command structure might break down. Accelerating the formation of a distinct EU command is therefore essential

for enabling the European Union to coordinate its own defense without relying on a potentially obdurate America.

For too long, the United States has been concerned that given the limited amount of money Europe spends on defense, spreading those resources over two distinct yet overlapping command structures would waste precious resources. However, military commands often do overlap. The Pentagon is rife with overlapping commands—in its combatant command structure, for instance, its regional commands overlap with functional commands such as Special Operations Command. Europe also needs overlapping commands to fill some of the clear gaps between EU and NATO roles, such as in border security.

Third, Europe should accelerate its quiet defense transformation. Without much fanfare, Europe has been taking small steps that could lead to a broader transformation of European defense.

Since the Ukraine crisis and in response to the threat from Russia, Europe is now quietly prioritizing defense. After a 20-year decline in defense spending, non-U.S. NATO defense spending increased by 3.8 percent—or \$10 billion—in 2016, led by Eastern European countries.<sup>30</sup> German defense spending “on weapons, munitions and other equipment rose by nearly 11 percent in 2016,” signaling an important shift.<sup>31</sup>

Europe is also gradually pooling more resources and capabilities, gaining greater efficiencies. Within NATO, the “Smart Defence” concept led to the lead-nation procurement initiative, which enables NATO members to pool resources and to jointly procure weapons systems.<sup>32</sup> This was used for the first time in December by eight NATO members, led by Denmark, to procure precision-guided munitions from the United States.<sup>33</sup> This also required changes to how the United States conducts its licensing arrangements. Additionally, through the European Defence Agency (EDA), the European Union is looking to increase the pooling of resources to address procurement gaps, such as in strategic airlift. Earlier this month, before the NATO summit, the European Union agreed to a joint defense fund, which seeks to expand EU investment into research and development for military systems, which would enable Brussels to target useful projects to develop.<sup>34</sup> The European Commission has also put forth a bold European Defence Action Plan, which would greatly expand the role of the European Union in the defense sector.<sup>35</sup> The European Union is particularly well-positioned to harmonize rules and regulations relating to the defense sector across EU states, just as the European Union has done in other sectors, which could strengthen coordination and collaboration among EU members.

Lastly, European states are also increasingly working together bilaterally and trilaterally to address military shortfalls. Germany is leading the way in this effort.<sup>36</sup> For instance, under NATO’s Framework Nations’ Concept, the Czech Republic and Romania will



integrate a brigade into a German-led multinational division.<sup>37</sup> These more ad hoc, bottom-up efforts help rationalize European defense efforts and reduce inefficiencies and are laying the groundwork for a more integrated European fighting force.

Fourth, Europe needs to increase its defense spending to address huge capability and readiness gaps. European militaries are hollowed out from underinvestment and are in a poor state of readiness. While Europe should prioritize addressing immediate readiness gaps, it must also make longer-term investments to address key capability gaps. For instance, European forces should prioritize the acquisition of critical enabling capabilities, such as strategic airlift to move forces to the fight or air-refueling tankers to keep fighters in the air. Major acquisitions take years, but Europe currently struggles to move and refuel its forces without U.S. support. These long-term acquisitions are needed to ensure that European forces can operate independently.

Lastly, the U.S. national security bureaucracy and Congress can take steps to bolster the alliance. While there is little that can be done if the president orders U.S. forces to stand aside in a crisis, given that the president does not seem to pay attention to policy details,<sup>38</sup> there is much that can be done beneath the headlines by the U.S. Department of Defense, the State Department, and Congress to bolster our allies and deter Russia.

For the Pentagon, given that there is much less White House oversight over deployment decisions than there was during the Obama administration,<sup>39</sup> the Department of Defense should take steps to ensure that U.S. forces remain at the tip of the spear in NATO deployments by ensuring robust U.S. force deployments to NATO's east and south. The presence of U.S. forces could complicate Russian efforts to instigate a crisis. The Pentagon should also continue to prioritize the deployment to the European theater assets with high deterrent value, such as F-22 fighters, and bolster maritime assets in the Baltic and Black seas.

Additionally, the State Department should change its approach to EU defense. Instead of opposing the development of an EU defense capability, the United States should actively embrace its creation. The State Department should proactively work to support the creation of an EU command, the elevation of the EU's role in pooling resources, and the investment in new defense capabilities through the European Union. The State Department should also push EU and NATO members to back the European Defence Action Plan and the empowerment of the EDA to gain efficiencies in European defense spending. Such a shift in U.S. diplomacy could have a transformative impact, as opposition to EU defense efforts often come from the most pro-American and committed NATO members, such as the United Kingdom and eastern members.

Finally, Congress should bolster the U.S. response to Russia. This means immediately strengthening sanctions against Russia in response to the interference in the U.S. election. Just as Congress enacted Iran sanctions with a veto-proof majority over

President Obama’s objections,<sup>40</sup> so should they in response to Russia. Additionally, Congress should fully fund the European Reassurance Initiative, which ensures that the United States has a persistent presence in Central and Eastern Europe,<sup>41</sup> as well as increase funding to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda in Europe.

Congress should also establish an Eastern European Security Assistance Initiative through the State Department to help these countries transition from Russian military equipment without sacrificing short-term military readiness. Congress should help Eastern European states end their reliance on Russian equipment by providing a mix of financing and direct assistance to facilitate expensive fighter and helicopter acquisitions, just as the Bush administration did to help Poland procure F-16s in 2002.<sup>42</sup> Currently, countries such as Bulgaria are balancing expensive fighter acquisitions with maintaining short-term readiness. Congress should help these allies bolster their forces.

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## Conclusion

In the wake of President Trump’s visit, it has become clear that Europe can no longer depend on a Trump-led America to guarantee its security. Yet as Europe begins to “take [its] fate into [its] own hands,” as Merkel proclaimed, its security remains vulnerable. With America seemingly unreliable and European militaries in poor states of readiness after decades of neglect, European security is in a precarious state. This has created a dangerous geopolitical moment, and Europe must take immediate steps to prepare itself in the event of a crisis. While this may sound alarmist, military planning is about preparing for low probability events. The better prepared Europe is to handle a security crisis on its own, the less likely one is to happen.

While the blow to American prestige and the trans-Atlantic alliance caused by Trump may be irreparable, a silver lining is that it may lead to a stronger and more assertive Europe that is a force for liberal and democratic values around the world. For decades, Europe has prided itself on its liberal values and its soft power. Ironically, whether Europe can rediscover hard power may determine the fate of liberal Europe.

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