

# ***Now What? Lessons for Europe from the NATO Summit***

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Texas National Security Review: Volume 1, Issue 4 (August 2018)

Print: ISSN 2576-1021 Online: ISSN 2576-1153



It is time for Europe to start considering a future in which the transatlantic relationship is no longer the bedrock of European security and the guide for European international policy. Such is the realization in many European capitals these days. “The Atlantic has widened politically,” writes Germany’s foreign minister, Heiko Maas, in a recent op-ed published simultaneously in German and English, in which he explains that he is “making plans for a new world order.”<sup>1</sup> The NATO summit in July in Brussels served as a reminder that this new world order is quickly becoming a reality, despite assurances from some to the contrary.

I was in Brussels during the summit, participating in the outreach conference, “NATO Engages.” One of the most striking moments of the conference was during the panel on U.S.-NATO relations — the number one topic of this summit. Two U.S. senators, Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Thom Tillis (R-NC), spent an hour reassuring the audience that there was “broad public support for NATO in the United States’ public and in the U.S. Congress.” They pointed to the motion that the Senate had passed with an overwhelming majority the day before, reaffirming the ironclad American commitment under NATO’s Article 5.<sup>2</sup> However, they had trouble convincing the skeptical audience, and, some 45 minutes into the debate, the feel-good session was disrupted by the news that President Donald Trump was allegedly threatening to withdraw the United States from NATO if allies did not agree to increase their defense spending.<sup>3</sup>

In the moment, one could not help being carried away by the commotion. But, in the end, Trump’s tantrum did not have any substantial impact on the summit’s outcome. Several commentators considered the 23-page summit communiqué that was signed to be one of the more substantial declarations in recent years, including a new Iraq mission and an invitation to Macedonia to join the alliance.<sup>4</sup> While Trump claimed victory as Europeans agreed to increase their defense spending, the reality is that this has been the trend for several years, predating the current U.S.

president’s term. It seems likely that any other American president would have gone home with exactly the same results.

It is tempting to take solace in the fact that NATO continues with business as usual, but Europe must not fall into the trap of complacency. And there are signs indicating that Europe is indeed beginning to come to terms with the new international realities.

## **America as a “Normal” Geopolitical Actor**

Although polling suggests that NATO remains popular in the United States,<sup>5</sup> such opinions could change if the president continues to tell his voters that NATO is robbing the United States. Contrary to the bipartisan elite consensus presented by Shaheen and Tillis, there are significant differences in opinion between conservative and liberal voters when it comes to NATO. In the United States, support for the alliance is turning into a topic of partisan politics, and could become a casualty of partisan fighting.

More importantly, Europe and the United States are gradually drifting apart.<sup>6</sup> By withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, pulling out of the Iran nuclear agreement, and unilaterally imposing tariffs, Trump has called into question Europeans’ formerly unshakeable faith in diplomacy as a way to resolve disagreements. Rather than basing America’s commitment to NATO on shared values and interests, Trump views it in a transactional way. The longer he remains president, the more alien to Europe the United States becomes as a country. But these changes extend beyond Trump. As Maas writes, “I am skeptical when some ardent trans-Atlanticist simply advises us to sit this presidency out.”

In other words, for Europe, the United States is becoming normalized. Rather than being seen as special, with global or, at a minimum, Western interests in mind, Europeans are starting to perceive the United States as just another geopolitical player. This shift can be seen most

1 Heiko Maas, “Making plans for a new world order,” *Handelsblatt*, Aug. 22, 2018, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/opinion/heiko-maas-making-plans-for-a-new-world-order/22940622.html?ticket=ST-5205142-xEbVl6PKam40poKWJaqj-ap3>.

2 “Senate Passes Reed Motion to Strongly Reaffirm U.S. Commitment to NATO Alliance,” *Latino Public Radio*, July 10, 2018, <http://lprnoticias.com/2018/07/10/senate-passes-reed-motion-strongly-reaffirm-u-s-commitment-nato-alliance/>.

3 Anna Palmer, Jake Sherman, and Daniel Lippman, “POLITICO Playbook: Trump Causes Chaos at NATO Summit,” *Politico*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/playbook/2018/07/12/trump-nato-withdraw-threat-285401>.

4 “Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018,” NATO, July 11, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm); David Wemer, “Here’s What NATO Achieved at Its Brussels Summit,” Atlantic Council, July 12, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/here-s-what-nato-achieved-at-its-brussels-summit>.

5 Bruce Stokes, “NATO’s Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic: European Faith in American Military Support Largely Unchanged,” Pew Global, May 23, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/05/23/natos-image-improves-on-both-sides-of-atlantic/>.

6 Ulrike Franke, “Watching for Signs of NATO’s End of Times,” *War on the Rocks*, July 10, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/watching-for-signs-of-natos-end-of-times/>.



strikingly in the results of a recent study done by the European Council on Foreign Relations (where I am a fellow), based on work by researchers in all 28 E.U. member states.<sup>7</sup> According to this study, five E.U. countries have begun to see the United States as “somehow a threat” or even “a moderate threat.” Asked about how the United States was viewed ten years ago, there was agreement among the researchers that no E.U. country would have considered the United States as a threat at that time. Even more concerning, when asked about how U.S.-E.U. relations might develop over the next ten years, the number of countries expected to consider the United States as some kind of a threat in the future rose to eight. These results indicate that this deterioration in relations is expected to continue beyond Trump’s presidency.

## Europe Responds

It will be up to Europe to build up its own capabilities and get ready to face the threats Europeans are most concerned about, rather than relying primarily on the United States. Europe needs to face the fact that NATO is unbalanced and will not be able to continue indefinitely in its current form. Acknowledging this fact is not about placing blame on particular countries — there is a historical reason for these imbalances. But if NATO members want to preserve the alliance, they need to prepare it for the future, both with regard to the alliance’s capabilities as well as with regard to burden-sharing. Unfortunately, it is this strategic debate that has become a casualty of Trump’s tantrums, as everyone at NATO is distracted defending the alliance from Trump’s ad hominem attacks.

While Europe has already been looking into strengthening common European capabilities — like increasing defense budgets — the Trump presidency, in combination with concerns over Russia and Brexit, has given European, and particularly E.U., initiatives a new impetus. The

Permanent Structured Cooperation, known as PESCO, was signed in November 2017, and today encompasses a range of projects, from a European Medical Command and sharing platforms for cyber attacks, to the development of a European Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle.<sup>8</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron’s proposal for a European Intervention Initiative aims at slowly creating a shared European strategic culture, an approach driven by the wish to create European “strategic autonomy.”<sup>9</sup> Even before Trump’s election, the concept was prominent in the 2016 European Global Strategy,<sup>10</sup> but Trump has given the idea a new boost as well as a new sense of urgency.

None of these initiatives are contradictory to NATO, but they suggest that it might be in these fora where the forward-looking projects will be pursued, rather than in NATO which is bogged down in a fight to justify its existence toward the United States.

Although the mechanisms for strengthening European capabilities are still taking shape, there is widespread agreement throughout the European Union that security threats are on the rise: Respondents in the abovementioned study judged that the threats their countries faced intensified between 2008 and 2018, and will intensify further in the next decade.<sup>11</sup> The most important threats that Europe needs to prepare for are, in descending order, cyber-attacks, state collapse or civil war in Europe’s neighborhood, external meddling in domestic politics, uncontrolled migration into the country, and the deterioration of the international institutional order.<sup>12</sup> Respondents expect the order of importance of these threats to remain largely the same over the next ten years (with terrorist attacks joining the deterioration of the international order in fifth place), and each threat to grow more intense. With regard to the international actors Europeans perceive to be most threatening, jihadists top the list, with Russia and international criminal groups sharing second place, and North Korea coming in third.

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7 Susi Dennison, Ulrike Esther Franke, and Paweł Zerka, “The Nightmare of the Dark: The Security Fears that Keep Europeans Awake at Night,” European Council on Foreign Relations (July 2018), [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the\\_nightmare\\_of\\_the\\_dark\\_the\\_security\\_fears\\_that\\_keep\\_europeans\\_aware\\_at\\_n](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_nightmare_of_the_dark_the_security_fears_that_keep_europeans_aware_at_n).

8 “Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) first collaborative PESCO projects – Overview,” The European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32079/pesco-overview-of-first-collaborative-of-projects-for-press.pdf>.

9 Nick Witney, “Macron and the European Intervention Initiative: Erasmus for Soldiers?” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 22, 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_macron\\_and\\_the\\_european\\_intervention\\_initiative\\_erasmus\\_for\\_sold](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macron_and_the_european_intervention_initiative_erasmus_for_sold).

10 “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe,” European Union, June 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf). Also see Nick Witney, “Brexit, Defence, and the EU’s Quest for ‘Strategic Autonomy,’” European Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_brexit\\_defence\\_and\\_the\\_eus\\_quest\\_for\\_strategic\\_autonomy](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_brexit_defence_and_the_eus_quest_for_strategic_autonomy).

11 Dennison, Franke, and Zerka, “The Nightmare of the Dark.”

12 Dennison, Franke, and Zerka, “The Nightmare of the Dark.”

Some of these threats are easier for Europe to take on than others. While increasing and better cooperation with regard to cyber threats should be an achievable goal, Russia is the elephant in the European room.

Indeed, it was the shared view among the experts present at the NATO summit in Brussels that the summit would only be truly over, and Europe's NATO members able to breathe freely again, once the Putin-Trump summit in Helsinki was finished — and did not end with Trump handing Putin Crimea, or promising NATO or U.S. troop withdrawals. In this regard, the Helsinki summit turned out better than feared. While the bizarre Trump-Putin press conference caused major debate in the United States, in Europe, the view was generally that it could have gone worse.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the strangely close relationship between the American and Russian presidents is particularly worrisome for Europe, as Russia remains a topic of contention within the European Union.

Although there is broad agreement among E.U. member states on most threats and actors, it is on Russia that the most problematic divisions exist.<sup>14</sup> Seven countries — Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and the United Kingdom — regard Russia as the most important threat to their security, and six others consider it a significant threat. However, five predominantly southern countries — Greece, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, and Cyprus — view Russia as no threat at all. The only way that the European Union can deal with these differences in opinion is by focusing on the areas of vulnerability rather than on the potential perpetrator of a given attack — for example, strengthening all E.U. member states against external meddling or cyber attacks in general. Nevertheless, the European Union is walking a tightrope with regard to its Russia policy. And an American president who is so unpredictable in his policy toward Russia, and who actively seeks to divide the European Union, introduces significant instability into the situation.

It is in this context that Trump's attacks against Germany's policy on gas imports from Russia at the NATO summit are so problematic. While the Nord Stream II pipeline, over which Trump attacked Chancellor Angela Merkel, is highly controversial throughout Europe and even within the German political establishment, Germany has been one of the most important advocates of Russian sanctions. Furthermore, accusing Germany of being too close

to Russia while simultaneously nourishing a highly unusual relationship with the Russian president appears dishonest.

Europe has to bring its own house in order if it wants to guarantee its security and keep NATO as the backbone of European defense. And it needs to prepare for a future in which that might no longer be possible.

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13 Marcin Gocłowski, "Trump-Putin Meeting Could Have Been Worse, Poland Says," *Reuters*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-nato-morawiecki/trump-putin-meeting-could-have-been-worse-poland-says-idUSKBN1K71GT>.

14 Dennison, Franke, and Zerka, "The Nightmare of the Dark."