What does NATO do for America?

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NATO’s existence has always been controversial. Indeed, each decade starting in the 1950s had an alliance crisis of some sort, with NATO often acting as the conduit for the expression of transatlantic disgruntlement. This should not undermine the fact that the alliance provided real benefits to the United States and its foreign policy interests over the last seven decades. This article engages in a stocktaking exercise, from an American perspective, considering what NATO delivered to the U.S. since its founding in April 1949. What value did NATO provide to the United States and are NATO’s benefits still evident today?

1949 and all that

NATO’s formation must be understood within the overall postwar goals of securing and integrating Europe within an international order. Conducting U.S. foreign policy meant coordinating national policies through international institutions that the U.S. helped establish, including the North Atlantic Alliance. U.S. postwar security concerns firstly centered on the Soviet-Communist threat that became apparent not long after the Soviet Union refused to observe its election promises in Eastern Europe while at the same time supporting subversive communist groups in Greece and Turkey and putting pressure on Iran. A communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade reinforced the realization that the Soviet Union was a potent physical threat to Europe and, thus, to American interests. In the early 1950s, in the aftermath of North Korea’s invasion of South Korea, the dangers of the emerging Cold War turning hot was considered the greatest threat. For example, Konrad Adenauer, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, chronicled in his memoirs his fears that Stalin wanted to carry out a similar invasion from East to West Germany.1

America through NATO also supported European integration and the building of multilateral institutions in Europe and beyond. President Franklin Roosevelt championed these goals in order to prevent a “retreat back into ‘fortress America’.”2 Roosevelt did not want the U.S. to win once again the war in Europe only to lose the subsequent peace. Yet at the same time, he knew that the American public would not accept any international involvement that might be perceived as entering into an “entangling alliance” with individual European states. Hence, a multilateral alliance with European states was preferable. A more permanent multilateral institutional framework, such as NATO, would overcome the obstacles thrown up by America’s isolationist tendencies, with the added benefit that it might actually contain the Soviet Union’s threat to Western Europe. These twin goals meant that NATO became the first peacetime military alliance that the U.S. joined.

The German Question

A second important component of securing Europe was the question what to do with Germany? The famous phrase of NATO’s first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, included as the second reason for NATO’s existence being “to keep the Germans down.” The other two necessities being “to keep the Russians out and the Americans in.” The German Question centered on the intentions of a strong German nation —
with militaristic tendencies — in the middle of Europe. The Federal Republic of Germany’s neighbors were quite content to have it remain demilitarized after the war while the Americans were not. Faced with American demands for German rearmament, following the outbreak of the Korean War, French Prime Minister René Pleven announced in October 1950 a plan for German remilitarization within the context of a European Defense Community (EDC). The overall idea was to enable greater Western European cooperation in defense matters using a similar strategy to reindustrialize Germany within the framework of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Just as French political economist and diplomat Jean Monnet had been behind the idea to reindustrialize Germany within the framework of the ECSC, he was also behind the idea to remilitarize Germany within the framework of the EDC. The subsequent Pleven Plan, announced in October 1950, had a European Army that included German units. However, the EDC failed because it did not pass the final hurdle, the French parliament, for a variety of reasons, the most important being that Stalin’s death in 1953 and the end of hostilities in Korea lessened Cold War tensions and made the issue of German remilitarization less urgent.

Nevertheless, the issue of German rearmament was still important to the United States and its concerns about the defense of Western Europe. Great Britain’s Prime Minister at the time, Anthony Eden, proposed the creation of a new defense organization, the Western European Union (WEU), which would act as a vehicle to facilitate West Germany’s admittance to the alliance. In May 1955, the Federal Republic of Germany became a member of NATO.

Cold War cornerstone

With West Germany joining (bringing membership to 15), the alliance became the cornerstone of the United States’ containment strategy in Europe during the Cold War. President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, in their goal to “roll back communism,” built a U.S. alliance system, which included NATO but also the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), the Central Treaty Organization with Middle Eastern Countries (CENTO), the Australia-New Zealand-United States pact (ANZUS) as well as bilateral security agreements with Japan and Taiwan.

Although tensions between the United States and European members of NATO were frequently present, the fundamental actions and arrangements underpinning European security were trusted and enduring. Containment remained the core of U.S. foreign policy for several decades, which in Europe was implemented through a combination of the Marshall Plan, NATO and the forward deployment of U.S. conventional and nuclear arms. This containment grand strategy also reflected U.S. values and principles at the time, with Americans believing that communism was godless, dangerous and morally wrong.

The main challenge to the transatlantic relationship during the Cold War, and the main cause of several crises, was the transatlantic balance of power. As the Europeans began to grow in economic stature, the more they began to seek to build an alliance on more equal terms — meaning Euro- peanists wanted a voice at the strategy table or they would begin to build their own institutions (that the Atlanticists argued would complement NATO). For their part, Americans began to increasingly voice that they wanted their European allies to contribute more financially for their own defense.

The Cold War ends

At the end of the Cold War and throughout the 1990s, Americans wanted NATO to re-invent itself. As a result, it began to take on new missions and new members in the newly opened Central and East European states that were key to American security interests in Europe at the time. For instance, at America’s impetus, NATO leaders developed the North Atlantic Coordination Council (NACC) in 1991 as a discussion forum with the former East European communist countries, followed in 1994 by the Partnership for Peace (PFP), which established guidelines for military cooperation between PFP members and NATO members.

East Germany seamlessly joined the alliance by way of German unification (which Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev accepted as an answer to any future threats posed by a united Germany), followed by Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which joined in the first wave of new membership as the alliance turned 50 in 1999. The Bill Clinton administration not only perceived NATO expansion to former Warsaw Pact countries to be in America’s interests, but Clinton used the NATO framework to implement his policy of “assertive multilateralism,” a course of action that eventually led the U.S. to be the key player in four multinational peace operations (Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo). In the last of these interventions, NATO used force under its own mandate for the first time in its history.

Overall, during his time in office, Clinton certainly regarded NATO expansion and operational innovation as key parts of U.S. foreign policy. This was in contrast to European member states, whose leaders were more circumspect. For example,
governments in France and Germany argued that as a defensive alliance NATO could only act when the UN explicitly authorized it. However, the Clinton administration’s view was that UN authorization would be appreciated but not necessary for NATO to act on its own in matters of European security. Reflecting on this interpretation and the circumstances regarding the intervention in Kosovo, Ivo Daalder wrote at the time, “Faced with the likelihood that the UN Security Council would veto NATO action while a looming humanitarian catastrophe threatened tens of thousands of refugees stuck in the Kosovo Mountains during winter, NATO decided to act.” Who is Daalder referring to when he indicates that NATO decided to act? Undoubtedly, it is the Americans, with the Clinton administration employing NATO as a tool for its foreign policy goals.

After 9/11

NATO’s re-invention continued with the first invocation of Article 5 of the Alliance’s Charter, invoked by the Europeans in response to 9/11. In a collective defense measure to protect the United States, NATO deployed airborne warning and command aircraft over U.S. airspace in the days after the terrorist attacks. Additionally, information exchange and antiterrorist consultations were enhanced with the PfP countries after the assault on the U.S. in September 2001.

When the war in Afghanistan began, the United States did not initially want to make use of NATO structures or rely on NATO forces, preferring coalitions of the willing in geo-strategic locations. This preference to work with non-alliance coalitions weakened NATO’s utility as a platform for security issues. As a result, not long after, NATO experienced its most profound crisis, which Robert Kagan argued stemmed from the fact that Europeans and Americans no longer shared a common view of the world — instead, Americans were from Mars and Europeans were from Venus.

However, in time and after disappointing results in Afghanistan, America’s military operation there was transferred to NATO, although European member states were not keen participants. In fact, the Europeans did not see the war in Afghanistan in the same way as the Americans did and those that sent troops did so because they wanted to maintain
good relations with America rather than accomplish any particular foreign policy goals of their own. The findings of a group of twelve experts, who were almost exclusively American and chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, that NATO remained an “essential source of stability in an uncertain and unpredictable world,” fell on increasingly deaf ears in Europe, where by 2010 publics were wary of continued involvement in Afghanistan. The fact that debates in The Netherlands, Poland and Spain about their countries’ involvement in southwest Asia eventually ended in decisions to withdraw was further symptomatic of a growing European public unease with operations in Afghanistan as well as a growing discomfort upon dependence on the United States for European defense.

The opposite was true in Libya, where it was the Europeans, in particular UK Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who both wanted to employ NATO forces to stop Muammar Qaddafi from massacring the people of Benghazi. While U.S. President Barack Obama did succumb to European pressure to intervene in Libya, for the first time in NATO history Obama also sought to lessen U.S. leadership in the alliance. In a speech at the National Defense University in March 2011, Obama stressed that the “burden of action should not be America’s alone.” Again, in remarks before a bipartisan group of members of Congress, Obama said, “our British and French allies, and members of the Arab League, have already committed to take a leadership role.” Although this handing over leadership to others was cosmetic, the fact that the U.S. was publicly shedding ownership of the alliance was jarring and foreshadowed a precarious future. In 2011, NATO did not attract much public attention or support in either the U.S. or Europe, with many Europeans viewing NATO as a relic of the Cold War.

Crimea

Starting in 2013, real threats began forming on NATO’s eastern flank. For instance, in April 2013, Russian warplanes staged an attack on Sweden and in September of that same year, Russia and Belarusian troops staged an exercise with an attack on Poland and Lithuania that employed 70,000

A lone soldier. Despite many initiatives over the years, NATO’s European members continue to lack military capacity (photo: U.S. Army)
troops. In 2014, Russian aircraft made 400 unannounced incursions in European air space, which was 4 times more than in 2013. Also in 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, leading Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to invoke Art. 4 of the NATO treaty, which allows an ally to consult with other members when it feels its security, its territorial integrity or independence are under threat. NATO was clearly back into the business of defense. In 2015, NATO pre-positioned command and control assets, plus logistics specialists, heavy weapons and ammunition in Szczecin, Poland, and Obama’s 2017 defense budget requested $3.4 billion to support this forward movement in NATO’s Central European member states.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s initial cabinet choices clearly picked up where Obama left off in the reinstitution of NATO. For example, Secretary of Defense General James Mattis, a former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, traveled the month after Trump was inaugurated to both Brussels and the Munich Security Conference in order to assure European allies that the U.S. would adhere to its alliance commitments and that these commitments were in the interests of the United States. Additionally, Mattis and National Security Adviser General H.R. McMaster, with the help of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, inserted a strong commitment to European allies in the draft speech that Trump would give on his first overseas visit — an eight-day trip to the Middle East and Europe in May 2017.

To the consternation of allies across the Atlantic, Trump himself did not share the views of his main foreign and security officials. Trump not only refused to reaffirm U.S. commitments to Article 5, but he harangued his fellow alliance members during his speech and also in the subsequent closed-door meetings at the new NATO headquarters. In particular, Trump reprimanded European allies for their levels of defense spending.

Bean counting

This focus on the amounts of defense spending by European states is not a new phenomenon. Starting in the 1970s, the burden-sharing debate, instigated by Senator Mike Mansfield, has vexed the alliance. Moreover, despite many initiatives over the years, NATO’s European members continue to lack military capacity. For example, the European Defense Agency (EDA) was created to address European Member States’ capability problem. The EU also introduced the “European Capabilities Action Plan” and “permanent structured cooperation” in the Lisbon Treaty in order to resolve the matter.  

NATO itself as an institution made efforts to address the military capacity problem. For instance, in the November 2002 Prague Summit a “Prague Capabilities Commitment” (PCC) was approved, which was, in turn, a more ambitious and focused version of the earlier 1999 Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI). It was in 2006 that the Defense Ministers of the NATO members made the aspirational commitment “to endeavour, to meet the 2% target of GDP devoted to defence spending.” However, in the ensuing years, fewer members actually met the 2% target. By July 2015, Stephen Walt, Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, could write that continued U.S. protection had encouraged EU elites “to let their own military capabilities atrophy into insignificance.”

From an American point of view, the fairness of the Europeans not bearing more of the burden of their own defense became an issue about the overall relevance of the alliance amid ever-dwindling public support. The fact that the American public questioned NATO’s relevance was a point that Trump capitalized upon to win support for his election. By 2016, it was clear that Americans did not appreciate the benefits of their own leadership on the world stage nor the rules based system that the U.S. established at the end of the Second World War, of which NATO was an integral component.

Does it serve U.S. interests today?

While Trump’s views on NATO were clearly enunciated in his last minute refusal to endorse Article 5 at an April 2017 White House meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and again in his speech at the NATO Summit in Brussels in May of that same year, the view of America’s foreign policy elite towards NATO is much more positive. For example, foreign policy experts in Congress advocate a line of policy that adheres to the postwar consensus, most obviously concerning the maintenance of alliances. To bolster this view, in January of this year, Congress passed a law that prohibits funding of a U.S. withdrawal from NATO. Additionally, U.S. career civil servants and the majority of the Republican foreign and national security experts continue to value NATO. Moreover, during Trump’s time in office, spending for America’s military presence in Europe has increased under the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which was recently renamed the European Deterrence Initiative. The Trump administration’s official documents, including the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), all restate America’s understanding of the value of allies and strategic
partners, reject isolationism and reaffirm the benefits of America’s leadership role overseas.

It is a worry in this case, that in his remarks announcing the NSS Trump appeared not to know its contents and, perhaps more worrying still, that the authors of the three documents all left the Trump administration by January 2019. The replacement Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and the third National Security Advisor, John Bolton, both hold views that are more pessimistic about alliances, with Pompeo exhibiting a penchant of knowing how to please his boss — a man who unswervingly remains a NATO skeptic.

The fact that it fell to Pompeo to host a rather subdued celebration of the alliance’s 70th anniversary with NATO foreign ministers (and not heads of government, meaning that Trump did not join), does not bode well for the United States’ continued affirmative valuation of the alliance. Today, those Americans who argue that NATO still serves American interests have the most influence. However, as Barry Posen, Director of MIT’s Security Studies Program, pointed out in an interview about the 70th Anniversary celebrations: if NATO did not exist today, it probably would not be invented.¹⁴

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American tanks in Europe. During Trump’s time in office, spending for America’s military presence in Europe has increased under the European Reassurance Initiative (photo: Flickr/NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization)