

NATO, An Obsolete Cold War Military Construct: Donald Trump and the History of the Atlantic Alliance

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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It should be a point of some delicious reflection for peace activists who have fought for decades against the nature of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. It brought the US deep into West European affairs, turning European states into garrisons. It involved the stationing of nuclear weapons. It compelled member states to go to war if the security of any one was threatened or breached.

Donald Trump, however, has little time for it. Selecting the *Bild* newspaper and the *Times of London* as forums to expand on his views on NATO, the President-elect decided to shake the tree that much more.

America First as an idea means that the alliance system needs to be reviewed. For one, Trump took issue with military spending from the members, suggesting that it did not even make 2 percent of gross domestic product.

But for Trump, the core issue was utility. What had the alliance actually done? Ever in the zone of the next news entertainment cycle, Trump felt that the alliance had done little on the issue of dealing with terrorism.

It was, in his carefree words, “obsolete because it wasn’t taking care of terror.” It had been “designed many, many years ago.” Just to confuse readers, and perhaps himself, Trump then explained that NATO was still “very important to me.”

Obsolescence is probably not quite the term. If it had just been a museum piece, a historical reminder, little fuss would be made. In actual fact, this was an alliance which ballooned with aggressive enthusiasm, one that was treated as a mechanism, not merely as a defence against the old Soviet Union and its allies, but offensively to operate in theatres far away from the area.

The one thing that stands out here is the momentum NATO developed at the end of the Cold War, doing its bit, less for stability than aggravating instability. With gloating hubris, the US-led alliance began to move into areas of influence in eastern Europe. Russian strategists, ever sensitive to threats on its borders, wished to prevent that matter in negotiations in 1990 which also featured the re-unification of Germany.

As an old foe was set to merge, Washington and Moscow were debating where traditional alliances would go. Would a reunified Germany join hands with NATO, or embrace the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact? The third option, that it would have nothing to do with either in middle-European distance, was also considered.

Meetings that took place in February 1990 show US Secretary of State James Baker discussing that a cooperative arrangement with Germany could be bought by making “iron-clad guarantees” that NATO would not enlarge “one inch eastward.”^[1] Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was sufficiently moved by the suggestion to begin reunification talks within a matter of days.

The picture soon changed. US policymakers were wondering whether they had given too much unnecessary ground. An initial concession was made: the former German Democratic Republic would be designated as an area where NATO forces would have limited influence. This was not a “status” that would last.

By March 1990, the State Department was pretending it had never proffered an enticing olive branch to Soviet officials. Eastern Europe, breathing gusts of the post-communist air, would be gathered to Washington’s large bosom. The odd remark would still be issued to reassure Moscow that this process would take place in a cooperative way.

None of this got away from the objective, as noted in a National Security Council memo from October 1990, that the US should “signal to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO’s readiness to contemplate their future membership.” In what seemed like a giddy rush, old Soviet foes – the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary – became card carrying NATO members, happy to become forward bases for Washington’s weapons. Murmurs of encouragement were then sent on their merry way to Georgia and Ukraine.

As the sole superpower, and the Soviet Union unravelling, promises were there to be ignored. The Russian bear had repaired to the forest of desperate isolation to lick its wounds, powerless to hold any sway over the decisions being made to its west. Now resurgent, that bear remains curious to see how a Trump administration will deal with NATO.

Trump’s comments, for all their worth, will have to bear up against the views of his own appointee for Defense Secretary, retired Marine Gen. James Mattis. As he reasoned in his Senate confirmation hearing last week, “If we didn’t have NATO today, we’d need to create it. NATO is vital to our interests.”^[2]

Mattis also sees old threats in newly fashioned bottles. “We recognize that [Vladimir Putin] is trying to break the North Atlantic alliance, and that we take steps – the integrated steps, diplomatic, economic, military and the alliance steps – working with our allies to defend ourselves where we must.”

Members of Congress, among them Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, have already told European allies that the alliance will be a business as usual affair, though German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier concedes to there having been “no easing of tensions.”^[3] It is hard to envisage that much will change on the ground, though it adds to the delightful dysfunction that is abound to descend upon Washington and various European capitals.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

^[1] <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-shiffrinson-russia-us-nato-->

deal-20160530-snap-story.html

[2] <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/01/17/trump-widens-potential-rift-with-mattis--over-nato.html>

[3] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-germany-idUSKBN1500XW>

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Kampmark](#)

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