



## ISSUE OF THE WEEK - FOREIGN POLICY

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**The Issue:** President Trump's attendance at the May 25<sup>th</sup> NATO Summit will be best remembered by his criticism of those Allies failing to meet their financial burden-sharing obligations. The President appears to have missed an opportunity to assuage uncertainties of his intentions or of the strength of U.S. commitment to NATO, but his remarks at a dedication ceremony underscored the need to ensure a strong Alliance for the future. Although the Summit fell short of the high drama many were braced for given President Trump's unpredictability, his focus on unmet financial obligations, following closely his remarks four days earlier in Riyadh on "principled realism" -- a foreign policy approach that may be wedded to his "transactional" view of international relations -- suggests that the Trump Administration will be reluctant to pursue "business as usual" within the Alliance.

**The background:** The North Atlantic Treaty Organization meets periodically at the level of Heads of State and Heads of Government, usually to take decisions at the highest level that mark new strategic directions for the Alliance, or to introduce new policies, initiatives, members or partners into the organization. Two-thirds of those meetings have taken place in the 26 years since the end of the Cold War -- a period marked with dramatic changes to the mission and membership of the Alliance, as well as to the reach of the organization beyond the borders of its member countries, particularly after 9/11. Since NATO's founding in 1949, Summits have not only provided strategic direction to the organization, but have served to strengthen Allied unity in the face of strategic threats or, at times, internal discord.

At this Summit, however, NATO's 29<sup>th</sup>, it was the absence of strategic assurances to Allies from the U.S. along with the President's omission of any declaration of to America's unwavering support for NATO's Article 5 "all-for-one and one-for-all" principle that captured the most attention. Indeed, the President's remarks reinforced the common view that he is inclined to view U.S. commitments to NATO as a transactional bargaining chip with uncertain long-term value. Although this conflicts somewhat with recent assurances of stalwart U.S. support for the Alliance from the American Secretaries of Defense and State, it follows a consistent thread from the President himself.

NATO Summits are typically preceded by meetings of the defense ministers and foreign ministers of the 28 member countries, whose tasks at those meetings are primarily focused on the agenda and "deliverables" for the forthcoming Summit -- the deliverable actions heads of state will (or will not) decide at the Summit. As Summits are fundamentally driven by political rather than defense considerations, it is not unusual for heads of state to depart from their anticipated decisions and scripts to accommodate such considerations, including domestic political influences. There is no question, for example, that politics heavily

influenced the decision at the 2002 Prague Summit to invite seven new members into the Alliance, when, up to that point, most expected only five. In any event, in an effort to script every Summit for success, agendas and deliverables are usually agreed well in advance to minimize uncertainty among Allies and to ensure that the final outcome reflects the consensus.

Although there were no real surprises at this year's summit, heads of state were likely disappointed that President Trump used the occasion to scold 23 member states for failing to meet their financial obligations, rather than praise them for taking affirmative action to meet the 2% GDP defense spending obligations by 2024 previously pledged in 2014 – progress towards which, for many Allies, began before 2017 and is well underway. Trump's pointed criticism perpetuated the view that he misunderstands or does not appreciate how NATO functions and how member states work to meet their obligations. Of course, it is also possible that the President's message was not intended solely for a NATO audience – the positive trends for defense spending will allow Trump to report at least some success to critics at home.

There is no question that the United States exercises the preeminent leadership role in the Alliance, a role in which it is heavily invested historically, politically and militarily, as well as financially. That said, the organization's governance structure ensures that the burden of political leadership is a shared one, constraining the U.S. ability to dominate the Alliance, while giving the U.S. ample leverage to influence decisions. Nevertheless, even the influence of the U.S. cannot always guarantee decisions will align with American preferences; the consensus-based decision process – one of the organization's greatest strengths (and sometimes weaknesses) – requires unanimity for all decisions. Dissent from consensus is not uncommon, but member states rarely dissent for reasons that are not in the perceived best interests of the Alliance. Thus, President Trump's pointed criticism of the failure of many Allies to meet their financial obligations – and Trump is certainly not the first U.S. President to raise this -- could play to his advantage if consensus decisions are needed to enforce compliance.

The President's May 25 remarks tacitly acknowledged the future relevance of NATO, reinforcing his declaration a month earlier that NATO was “no longer obsolete.” However, his emphasis on Allies paying their fair share, on focusing on terrorism and immigration, and on defending NATO's eastern and southern borders, with scant mention of Russia, are not only consistent with his previous remarks, but also with his omission of any reference to the Alliance's shared values of democracy and rule of law – perhaps a nod to “principled realism”, which presumably questions the transactional importance of such shared values.

NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg previewed the Summit on the morning of May 25 by outlining steps Allies would agree to take to step up NATO's role in fighting terrorism as well as to increase defense spending and strengthen capabilities in meeting their contributions to NATO missions, operations and engagements. The additional steps to fight terrorism Stoltenberg announced were, in fact, more symbolic than real since NATO already actively

participates in these efforts. Similarly, the steps he announced to increase Allies' defense spending was more of a repackaging of 2014 pledges than something actually new.

In short, Stoltenberg's preview was a thinly veiled introduction to the agreed agenda and "deliverables" of the Summit, not unlike at previous Summits, but his preview also omitted any reference to shared values, a requisite mantra for NATO leaders in the post-Cold War era. Not surprisingly, his statement at the press conference following the meeting -- presumably in lieu of a communique which often accompanies Summits -- reiterated most of the same "deliverables", albeit with added emphasis on defense against Russia, but also omitting any reference to shared values.

It is too early to tell how the Trump Administration's relationship with NATO will evolve, particularly if "principled realism" -- absent a commitment to shared values -- becomes a cornerstone of the *Trump Doctrine*. Nevertheless, Mr. Trump's predecessors' embrace of those shared values became the political cement that binded U.S. national security policy to NATO. Although that cement, ironically, began to weaken in the wake of 9/11 when the U.S. chose to conduct the war in Afghanistan without seeking NATO's Article 5 support. Without that cement, NATO could become an instrument of convenience, rather than first preference. In any event, Mr. Trump's supporters will certainly applaud his efforts to enforce fiscal discipline in Brussels and underscore that his very presence at NATO was a sufficient demonstration of U.S. commitment to the Alliance. His detractors will lament the abandonment of shared values as the moral fibre of America's defense partnership with Europe and could become apprehensive of a foreign Policy approach based on "principled realism", whatever that may actually mean.