Do We Need NATO?

by Michael Curtis

NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, remains a problem for the U.S. Did it lose its purpose and objective after the Soviet Union was declared dissolved by Mikhail Gorbachev on December 25, 1991, or is it still a useful instrument of Western military and political policies? The organization did not disband but rather altered its mission and expanded in numbers, including former Warsaw Pact members, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A number of factors are pertinent. The U.S., though troubled by these changes did not withdraw from NATO. Germany remained as the crucial European partner.Though Russia was obviously concerned about these developments, it is however unlikely that this NATO expansion was a significant reason for its more aggressive posture in recent years.

On April 4, 2019 NATO celebrated its 70th birthday at a gathering of the foreign ministers representing the 29 countries now members of the military pact. The pact began with 12 members in the atmosphere of the Cold War as a shield

against aggression of the Soviet Union which seemed a threat. Equally, a major problem was that two major Western European countries were facing a substantial communist influence, with the Popular Democratic Front including the Communist Party in Italy led by Palmo Togliatti gaining 31% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, and 30.8% in the Senate in April 1948 elections, and the CP in France led by Maurice Thorez obtaining 28.26 % of the vote and the largest number of seats in the National Assembly in the November 1946 election.

Seventy years later, fear of the return of the Cold War is a less substantial phenomenon, and the charge of "collusion" between the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and unnamed Russian officials has been dismissed by the Mueller Report. Yet, there is a hazy line between Russian attempts at subversion of the West, using modern scientific methods as well as traditional activity, and overt conflict. NATO has always differed from other military organizations in that it claims it is not only a military pact but also an alliance of countries with shared values, individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and rule of law, and it has a mechanism for collective defense and military command.

From the start, there have been ironies in the composition of this "North Atlantic" alliance and in these claims. Geographers have been obliged to accept Balkan countries, and Hungary and Bulgaria as well as Turkey as countries within the designated region of North Atlantic. In addition, the portrait of Turkey is less democratic than autocracy, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who is the holder of all executive power, and who in 1996 defined democracy as "not a goal, but an instrument."

A constant source of friction is finance by member nations. Funding in needed in three areas: military; civil, investment, communications, other non-military costs; and security investment program.

President Donald Trump made the disparity in spending by the different countries central to his attitude to NATO, arguing that the U.S. alone cannot account for the vast majority of NATO defense spending. At the NATO summit in 2014 the members committed themselves to spend 2% of GDP for defense. At least 20% of that is supposed to be spent on weapons and improving military capabilities. The basic problem is that only 7 of the 29 members, U.S, (3.57%), UK (2.12%) Greece, (2.36%), Poland, the three Baltic states, meet the 2% target. Germany has never met its commitments to NATO. It is spending 1.5%, and may go lower to 1.25%. Germany argues that to raise its defense expenditure to 2% would mean increasing its budget to $ 65.8 billion from the present $ 41.6 billion. Political problem is that German Social Democrats, if they gain power, promise more social spending, not defense spending.

Italy spends 1.12% on defense. However, European countries have increased their defense budgets since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and aggressive posture, many countries are near the 2% mark.

On April 4, 1949, NATO was formed in the U.S. State Department by 12 nations as an intergovernmental military alliance, a shield of Europe against aggression. NATO is based on the principle of collective defense, if one member is attacked, all are attacked, according to Article 5 of the NATO treaty. It implies members can consult and cooperate on defense and security related issues, and will take part in crisis management operations. In fact, this provision of Article 5 has been used only once, when nations cooperated with the U.S. over the response to 9/11.

NATO has been confronted by a considerable number of strategic, military, and political nature. One problem is agreement or differences between members on specific issues. Europe and the U.S. have been divided on a number of issues: Kosovo, 1998-9 when the Kosovo Liberation Army in the conflict was assisted by NATO air support; the Iraq war; the 2015

nuclear weapons deal with Iran; the tension between Spain and Catalonia; the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia; policy in Syria; the security of Libya; membership of Montenegro.

Moreover, some members were more sympathetic to Russian interests than others, as in refusal to condemn Russian annexation of Crimea, or are prepared to make deals with the Russians. Turkey insisted on a purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, partly because it could not buy U.S. Patriot missiles. It also threatens the Kurdish region of Rojava in NE Syria.

The Trump administration has differed on the exact relevance and purpose of NATO today as well as on specific issues. Among them are ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, peacekeeping in Bosnia, the war in Iraq 1991, the extension of security and stability beyond European borders, withdrawal from intermediate range nuclear missile treaty with Russia, and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

For the Trump administration, NATO should be more focused on issues of terrorism, mass migration, and on international trade than on present NATO policy. One indication of the Trump preference is the designation on May 9, 2019 of Brazil as a non-member partner of the NATO alliance, a decision that allows Brazil access to U.S. military technology. Trump also supports Brazil as a member of OECD, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. More important are two factors: the rivalry, economic, political, and strategic, between the U.S. and China, and a trade war that Trump sees as operating to U.S. disadvantage; and the increase in Russian power and ambitions.

The U.S. administration is aware of Russia as a powerful and dangerous force. This was clearly shown by the role of the Su-27, flanker fighters, advanced jet fighters, which patrol the Baltic and challenge NATO planes in international air space. Russian planes in June 2017 flew close to a U.S. Boeing

RC-135 reconnaissance plane; at another time, they intercepted a B52 over the Baltic. The development of Russian missiles means the whole NATO area is in danger.

To meet the Russian threat, NATO in July 2018 set up two new military commands and activity to counter cyberwarfare, and new plans to protect Poland and the Baltic states. It sent 4,000 troops to the area, accompanied by air and sea patrols.

Nevertheless, the dilemma remains for Trump. A clear policy should be formulated. At various moments Trump has doubted the value of NATO, and declared the US would not automatically defend an attacked NATO country, though at the same time he is still committed to Article 5 of the Treaty. He is certainly opposed to the development of a European Army, which President Emmanuel Macron appears to have suggested.

Is Trump a nationalist or a moderate internationalist, or both? He is skeptical of being involved, as were previous U.S, presidents, in promotion of democracy in the Middle East, as some Europeans have urged as an objective. His focus, clearly articulated, is on specific U.S. interests. The outstanding question is whether, if NATO is ended, Trump can build coalitions of nations with similar values and strategic objectives.