

Donald Trump American Matador

by Michael Curtis



This is the season on the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, at the Sanfermines festival when hundreds of foolhardy youngsters run through the street, as has been the custom for 700 years defying the animals from goring and trampling them. In 2017 thousands engaged in this diversion, and 64 were injured, in the event that Ernest Hemingway in his 1926 book *The Sun also Rises* called a battlefield with brave heroes in the equivalent bullring.

The political international bullring is now the arena for President Donald Trump to display diplomatic skill if not comparable bravado in either running or being chased or being gored by NATO members through the streets of Brussels in July 11-12, 2018, sipping tea with Queen Elizabeth at Windsor on July 15 and discussing with Prime Minister Theresa May and perhaps his “friend” Boris Johnson the turmoil in British politics, and going to Helsinki, Finland, on July 16 to meet mano a mano with Russian President Vladimir Putin, presently basking in the afterglow of the World Cup. The open question

is whether Trump will, like Hemingway's matador, let the bull pass so close that the man and the animal are one sharply etched mass?

Trump is engaged in two interrelated encounters: the enigmatic Russian regime under Putin, and the NATO trans-Atlantic alliance, founded in 1949, led by the U.S. since its creation, and now numbering 29 members. An open question is whether going to Helsinki, a few days after Brussels, implies Trump's displeasure with NATO. The meeting with Putin reinforces Trump's emphatic call at the G7 conference on June 8, 2018 for Russia to be readmitted to the group from which it was expelled in 2014 because of the annexation of Crimea. NATO, exacerbated by Trump's call is unlikely to agree with him that Crimea is part of Russia because its people speak Russian.

The creation of NATO in 1949, an intergovernmental military alliance originally of 12 countries, was for collective defence against an external party, in reality the Soviet Union and the fear of Communist expansion in Europe. The immediate question for Trump is the purpose and objective of NATO now that the Soviet Union has ended, and the Warsaw Pact, the Communist collective defense treaty, regarded as the Communist balance of power to NATO was disbanded in 1991. Will Trump, who has already cut U.S. funding to UN organs be as critical or hostile to NATO as to other multilateral organizations such as NAFTA and WTO?

Trump must deal with a considerable number of issues of concern to both the U.S. and NATO, now 29 countries: the function of the military alliance; the contribution NATO can make to defense and to security of its partners; the cost of the alliance and the financial burden on the U.S.; the containment of Russia; the issue of Macedonia membership of NATO; the U.S. pulling its troops and bases out of Europe and the Ukraine; the rise of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism in European countries; the unclear role of Turkey with its leaning towards Russia; the Iran nuclear

deal; the uncertainty of the U.S. taking part in future NATO exercises in Poland and the Baltic states; the security of Israel; the extent of cooperation in the new military commands and in cyber warfare and counterterrorism. Above all is the controversial issue of whether the U.S. is still committed to Article 5 of the NATO Charter, that each member consider an armed attack against one member state to be an armed attack against them all.

Even if one does not approve the general policies of Trump toward NATO, or accept his derogatory view that NATO is obsolete, many will agree, as previous U.S. presidents have argued, that the U.S., which as the leading economic and military power has led the alliance, has been and still is bearing a disproportionate financial load, compared with the other 28 member countries, most of which have failed to meet military spending commitments.

Most NATO countries have delayed or refused to adhere to the agreed target of each member raising 2% of GDP on defense, the starting point of what Trump has termed, "our shared collective security commitments." Only five countries have met the target. The US raises 3.6% of GDP, the UK 2.1%, Poland 2.0%, Greece 2.4%, and Estonia, 2.1%.

Germany, in which the U.S. has 35,000 troops, raises 1.2%, Canada 1.0 %, Spain and Belgium 0.9%. France and Turkey are close to the target with 1.7%. Some, but not all NATO countries, in response to Trump's criticism, have promised to increase their share.

Yet, after a period in which NATO military expenditure had fallen there have been four consecutive years of increased spending, largely the result of perceived threats from Russia, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and NATO did begin a 5,000 troop force to deploy to troublespots rapidly, a security mobility pledge to move troops between countries, to counter a Russian threat.

Expenditure of NATO countries in 2017 was \$900 billion, of which the U.S. contributed \$610 billion. This is much larger than military spending by Russia. Under Putin, military expenditure, 2003-2013 doubled. But in 2017 the increase stopped: the Russian total was \$66.3 billion, \$4.3% of GDP compared with 5.3% in 2016, a decrease that probably resulted from falling oil export revenues. Yet, these figures and the disproportion with NATO finances may be deceptive because Russia has unreported assets: leveraging financial power, propaganda targeted at appropriate groups, and cyber power.

Contributions to NATO by member countries for its military budget, civil costs mainly for headquarters in Brussels, (\$252 million) and the NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP) are also disproportionate. Of the total NATO military budget, the U.S. supplies 22% the UK 12%, France \$ 12 % and Germany \$16%. The U.S. contribution to the NATO civil budget is 21.7%.

Another way of assessing the disproportion is in relation to population. The U.S. provides \$1,800 per capita, followed by Norway \$1,400, UK \$907, and Germany \$546.

Russia has been the flavor of the year in the US Congress and judicial system over its alleged electoral interference, response to NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe, involvement and friendship with rulers in Syria and Iran, and Russian responsibility for suspicious deaths including poisoning of former Russian double agents living in Britain.

Unlike Wordsworth's Lucy, Vladimir Putin does not dwell among the untrodden ways, but like her there were, at least in the U.S. and among most of the NATO countries, none to praise, and very few to love. The present problem is that many in the U.S. and in Europe believe that Trump has a strange fit of passion for Putin, a fellow strong leader, but he sees Putin as a "competitor."

Russia is no longer a totalitarian system on Stalinist lines

characterised by a monolithic political regime based on a Communist ideology; an all powerful state in control of a docile society; use of terror and lies; purported objective to create a “new man”; ambition to spread the message to the rest of the world. Yet, there were always places of autotonomy, plotting, palace intrigue, among the ambitious leaders in the Kremlin, as the 2017 comic film *The Death of Stalin* has portrayed; as well as cells of family, community, associations, nationals; and evolution of the regime over time especially with *perestroika* in 1985.

If Putin is not Stalin or Lenin, nor a mastermind, he presides over a complex system that includes an empire of spies and secret police linked to criminal underworld with protection rackets and drug smuggling, powerful oligarchs, and has encouraged or been indifferent to extra-judicial executions some of which appear linked to warring intelligence services. It remains unclear who is responsible for the large number of political murders in Moscow and in Britain.

It is for Trump to find out what is the real Putin and his country. Russia once ruled more than a sixth of the planet and clearly Putin, though he may not be the heir of the Mongol Empire, is aiming to reclaim the greatness and power of his country, partly by looking East, and by alliances with China, Turkey, and Iran, and influence in the Middle East. Does Trump share Putin’s view that that the West is no longer the center of the world?

Trump speaks of Russian “malign activities.” He and Putin disagree on the Iran nuclear deal, on supplying oil to Iran, on the war in Syria, use of chemical weapons by Russia in Britain and elsewhere, cyber space; the truth about Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 election.

Yet, they can agree on certain issues. Both no longer demand the ouster in Syria of President Assad. Both share aims: arms control and control over nuclear weapons and ballistic defense

systems; strategic stability; keeping Iran backed forces in southern Syria away from the border line with Israel; having Hezbollah fighters removed from the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon; denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

In both the NATO and Helsinki meetings Trump must be the skilful conciliator as well as careful matador in the two bullrings. He should not link the problem of U.S. trade deficit with the EU, 15 of whose members are in NATO, with the military alliance. Trump must know who is the U.S. strategic friend and who is a strategic problem. Constructive engagements is desirable for all parties, but what is crucial above all is U.S. rapprochement with Russia and persuading Putin to collaborate with the U.S. in fighting terrorism around the world.