

Donald Trump and NATO

Whatever else can be said about Donald Trump, everyone can agree he is a provocateur who intentionally or not stirs controversy on subjects to which little political attention has been focused. He has injected a new issue in the presidential campaign by referring to NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as "obsolete" and arguing that the United States was spending too much money on it, while some or many of the other countries were "free loaders."

It is improbable that Trump has thought long or deeply on the subject of NATO but he has opened a genuine debate on it. NATO, founded on April 4, 1949 by 12 countries, was a product of the Cold War mainly intended to provide collective security against the Soviet Union and its satellite countries in the Warsaw Pact. After the end of the Soviet Union this particular main objective was no longer germane but NATO increased to 28 countries.

NATO has always been dominated by the U.S., a reality leading to both foreign and domestic criticism for different reasons. The strongest expression of disapproval was by French President Charles de Gaulle. In a letter of March 7, 1966 he told President Lyndon B. Johnson that France expected to remain a party to the NATO treaty. However, because changes had occurred in international affairs since 1949, France could not agree to the existing military arrangements.

Therefore, France intended to recover in her territory the full exercise of her sovereignty, presently impaired by the presence of "Allied military elements," and the use made of French air space. France would terminate its participation in "integrated" commands and would not place forces at the disposal of NATO.

Nevertheless, in spite of differences with NATO and withdrawal

in June 1959 of French naval forces from NATO, France did not leave NATO.

Despite some criticism, Europeans have generally welcomed the U.S. role in NATO. However, it has troubled Americans, and Donald Trump perhaps inadvertently, has touched on the problem. A recent poll of American attitudes shows an increase in those who are unfavorable to U.S. membership of NATO: it is now 31 per cent, compared to 21 per cent in 2010. The political parties are divided: only 43 per cent of Republicans and 56 per cent of Democrats express favorable views of NATO.

Irrespective of political and military issues, there are two issues of concern, finance and insufficient or irrelevant activity. Trump may have exaggerated the U.S. financial contribution to NATO, but the U.S. share, calculated on the basis of gross national income, of direct spending is 22 per cent. Among other countries, Germany contributes 15 per cent, France 11 per cent, and UK 9 per cent. The US is not spending "billions and billions" on NATO as Trump argued, but about \$500 million a year.

However, Trump is correct, if again exaggerating, in pointing out that the vast majority of NATO countries do not meet the guidelines set up in 2006 that defense spending in each country should be at least 2 per cent of its GDP. While that of the U.S. is 3.7 per cent, only 4 NATO countries have reached the 2 per cent figure. In all the U.S. provides 73 per cent of NATO's defense spending.

Yet, to call NATO countries "free riders" may be too strong. Even though the countries of the EU as whole do not spend 2 per cent of GDP on defense, they do spend \$300 billion, the second largest defense budget in the world.

Trump has raised a crucial question: is the US spending on NATO worth it, and indeed is NATO relevant? In recent decades NATO played a role in various non-North Atlantic conflicts in

Afghanistan, in enforcing a no-fly zone in Bosnia in 1993, and in Libya in March 2011 when an allied coalition decided to enforce an arms embargo, to maintain a no-fly zone, and to protect civilians under attack. But NATO did not intervene in Syria, in spite of the use of poison gas by the Assad regime in August 2013, partly because of the realization that terrorists were among the rebel forces fighting Assad.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO relations with Russia have been diplomatically appropriate if not friendly. The NATO-Russian Founding Act of 1997 declared that the two parties did not see each other as adversaries. The NATO-Russia Council was created in 2002 to discuss security issues and joint projects. There are now differences between the parties as Russia has become more assertive, with Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Russian intervention in Syria in support of Assad.

The two sides are not in a new Cold War but they are not at present in the partnership that was established at the end of the Cold War. NATO has been increasing its military assets to defend Europe against any aggressive Russian aggression. Among its preparations are a Readiness Action Plan, a rapid-reaction Spearhead Force, and a European Reassurance Initiative. The U.S. is planning to increase its troop presence in Europe by 3 brigades and by stationing heavy equipment in Eastern Europe.

NATO has played a significant role in maintaining peace in Europe, but this preparation for defense against the more assertive Russia is now the wrong priority for NATO. The challenge to international order does not come from Moscow but from other parties. NATO as an organization should concentrate on two issues: defeating Islamist terrorism; and solving the growing immigration crisis.

NATO is not in itself a part of the US-led coalition to destroy ISIS, but the individual European countries are part of it. Islamist terrorism, by ISIS, al-Qaeda and others has made NATO relevant. It is fair criticism that NATO has been

insufficiently geared to combat the upsurge in international terrorism or to help in the immigration crisis.

Among other actions, NATO is belatedly sending ships to Eastern Mediterranean to combat people smugglers, monitoring the flow of migrants and working in harmony with coastguards in Greece and Turkey. NATO is using five warships, as well as other ships, to help stem the flow of migrants to Europe by its presence in the Mediterranean and in the Aegean Sea. As a by-product of this, the two historical foes, Greece and Turkey are collaborating.

NATO is not obsolete. In the fight against terrorism it can help the countries that share in common the values of democracy, free speech, and the rule of law. President Barack Obama, explaining his policy of restraint, may have been mathematically accurate in his assertion that terrorism has taken fewer lives than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs. But it is the task of both the U.S. President and NATO to ensure that the number of fatalities does not increase.