

Putin and Trump on NATO

by Michael Curtis

The recent consensus by the German foreign minister, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and presidential candidate Donald Trump on the problem and activity of NATO has come as an unexpected surprise.

First was the statement on June 17, 2016 by the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who accused his fellow members of the NATO alliance of “warmongering” against Russia, and warned of inflaming the situation with “loud saber-rattling.”

Steinmeier was critical of the recent NATO military exercises in Poland and the Baltic countries. This had been the most extensive war game in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War. Accompanied by fighter jets, ships, and 3,000 vehicles, more than 31,000 troops, including 14,000 from the U.S. and 1,000 from the UK had participated in Operation Anaconda, a 10 day exercise aimed at countering a Russian attack. Somewhat ominously, this was the first time since Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 and started World War II that German tanks had entered Poland.

For his part, the German foreign minister did not want to renew an old confrontation. He agreed that NATO must maintain its military preparedness, but he also argued that NATO should not create pretexts to renew an old confrontation. This is a different point of view from that of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg who declared that Russia was seeking to create a zone of influence through military means. In contrast, Steinmeier argued that there ought to be more space for dialogue and cooperation between NATO and Russia.

An echo of this argument came on the same day from Russian President Vladimir Putin who spoke on foreign relations and

his view of U.S. presidential candidates. Putin has asserted on a number of times that Russia has no plans to intervene in any country in Eastern Europe. He made the point that NATO needs a foreign enemy otherwise there would be no reason for its existence.

In his remarks on June 17, 2016, Putin accepted that the U.S. is probably the only superpower in the world. He asserted that Russia wanted to and was ready to work with the US. However, though the world needs strong nations, “we don’t want them constantly getting mixed up in our affairs.”

Most intriguing for Americans were Putin’s comments on present day U.S. presidential candidates. In earlier remarks Putin had referred to Donald Trump as bright, brilliant, talented. He praised Trump for saying he was ready to restore full-fledged American-Russian relations. At that time, he said little about Hillary Clinton, referring to her obliquely in saying “husband and wife are the same devil.” He later confessed he had been too impulsive, and that he will work with whomever the American people chooses as its president.

On June 17, Putin politely and carefully referred to Hillary, saying he had not worked much with Clinton while she was secretary of state. Without comment, he said, “She probably has her own view of US-Russian relations.” Putin was more compelling about Bill Clinton with whom he had “very nice relationship.” He acknowledged he was grateful to Bill “for several moments when I was making my entrance into world politics.” Putin, however, did not mention his disagreement with Hillary in 2011 when he said that her State Department sent “signals” and support to opposition leaders during large street protests against the government when Putin was prime minister.

Trump has incorrectly argued that Putin, in those early remarks, had referred to him as a “genius” and misinterpreted his remarks as a great honor. This was not the case and Putin

became more diplomatic and cautious in his language. It was not his business to assess Trump's worthiness. In a somewhat ambiguous remark he limited his characterization of Donald Trump to being "flamboyant," and "colorful, talented without any doubt."

It is interesting to examine the interrelation between Trump and Russia from both a political and personal point of view. Politically, Trump, though his full views on the issue and on foreign policy in general are unclear, is in tune with Putin and Russia regarding NATO. In his speech on April 27, 2016 Trump was critical of NATO in which only 4 of the 28 countries, besides the US, are spending the minimum required 2% of GDP on defense.

More important, Trump called for the upgrading of NATO's outdated mission and structure, stemming from the Cold War, which was designed to meet the threat from the Soviet Union that doesn't exist any more. That objective is obsolete. Together with Russia, NATO he argued should confront shared challenges, especially migration and Islamic terrorism. NATO should be changed to fight terrorism.

In spite of Trump's implication to the contrary, so far there has been no personal relationship between him and Putin. Since 1987, Trump, and members of family and staff, have made a number of business trips to Russia examining the possibility of building luxury apartments and a condominium complex in Moscow. Indeed, many commentators thought that Trump's presidential campaign was originally intended to focus on his dream of building a Trump Tower in Moscow.

But Trump, in spite of his attempt to do so, has never met Putin. In November 2013 Trump took the Miss Universe pageant to Moscow, and personally invited Putin to attend the ceremonies. Putin accepted but finally did not attend, sending a decorative box in Russian style to Trump, and a close associate. This was Vladimir Kozhin, a close ally and long

time friend, who is now Putin's adviser on military and technical cooperation.

At the same time Trump reached out to another of Putin's associates, Aras Agalarov, a real estate billionaire, popularly known as the Trump of Russia, almost certainly for real estate projects rather for discussion of any political issue.

However, it is worth noting that Paul Manafort, Trump's main campaign manager, was an adviser to Victor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine who fled to Russia after the 2014 revolution in Ukraine.

Trump's foreign policy ideas are not yet clear or perhaps not yet formulated. But on the specific issue of Russia he has proposed cooperation with Moscow on Syria, counterterrorism, and trade, while remaining uncritical and even defensive about Russian censorship, dismantling of news organizations, and violations of human rights.

It is probably true that both Trump and Clinton agree that the level of cooperation with Russia should be increased. It is now time for Hillary Clinton to make clear her position on NATO and its objectives, especially on the priority to be given to the war on Islamist terrorism.