

## NATO and the War on Terror

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**During his campaign for the American presidency, Republican candidate Donald Trump repeatedly characterized the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as ‘obsolete’.<sup>1</sup> After his election in November of last year, he stuck to this view until NATO in February announced the opening, later this year, of a new intelligence and counterterrorism hub in Naples.<sup>2</sup> In his criticisms of NATO, Trump emphasized three issues. One, many European partners were lagging seriously behind in replenishing their defense budgets to the notorious benchmark of 2% of GDP.<sup>3</sup> Two, NATO was slack in dealing with international jihadist terrorism. Three, the European allies’ fears of Russian aggression were misplaced. Even during his first visit to the new NATO headquarters on May 25, he did not publicly endorse Article 5 of the NATO charter, the crux of the alliance. His endorsement may well be conditional on the proven willingness of members to pay up.**

### Trump’s NATO criticisms

On the budget, Trump was right. Most European NATO partners had not invested their agreed share for years on end. Rather, overall defense budgets in Europe had been shrinking because of complacency about Europe’s security, while since 2007 the financial and ensuing economic crisis made matters worse. Allies who, in the context of counterterrorism, participated in the various Afghanistan and Iraq operations, had been compelled to earmark a large part of their declining budgets for those activities. The resulting shortages in overall military maintenance became painfully obvious during the Libyan campaign in the Summer of 2011, when after even less than three months of fighting, European NATO partners had to turn to the United States’s arsenals for ammunition. The situation was exacerbated when, from 2014 onward, Russia changed its attitude toward the European Union and various other neighbors, by shedding its compliant partner-role, displaying vindictive aspirations for regaining her superpower status instead. NATO, and certainly its European members, had to consider its response to the Russian annexation of the Crimea and continuing Russian conflict-provoking mischief in Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic area.<sup>4</sup> Increasing awareness of dangerous backlogs in military preparedness and the development of latent or not so latent conflicts on Europe’s eastern borders, combined with a measure of economic recovery at home apparently made the European NATO members rather amenable to responding to Donald Trump’s budgetary demands.

On the matter of NATO and counterterrorism, Trump’s criticisms were widely off target for a variety of reasons, as will be elaborated below. NATO had been sloppy in tackling terrorism, Trump opined, while this vital problem should have been the organization’s primary concern. During his campaign, the Republican candidate made it clear that the major purpose in his counterterrorism policies would be crushing ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham.<sup>5</sup> Pulverize ISIS and terrorism will bleed to death, he believed. NATO would remain obsolete if it did not partake in the crushing, he seemed to argue. Interestingly, Trump repeatedly proposed to cooperate closely with Russia in the fight against ISIS. Russia, of

course, knows how to crush. While European NATO members had become increasingly distrustful of Russia's geopolitical intentions on their continent, and the American and Russian air forces during the Obama administration had come close to geopolitical skirmishes in the skies over Syria, the new American president obviously did not share such worries. Instead, he was soft-soaping his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, as his brother-in-arms against jihadist terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

NATO members largely agree with President Trump on the fairness of burden-sharing and the importance of counterterrorism. Evidently, they also want the United States to remain committed to NATO. Still, major questions remain about relationships within the alliance. Now that they have promised at the Brussels summit to join the anti-ISIS campaign, how far will European NATO members go in supporting the president's trigger-happy approach to counterterrorism? Will Donald Trump adjust his rosy views on the geopolitical ambitions of Russia? Will the European members claim their rights as equal partners to the US regarding decision-making in NATO?

This article presents some concerns underlying these questions.

### **NATO's role in fighting terrorism**

Donald Trump was wrong in his indiscriminate charge against NATO's underrating counterterrorism issues. Immediately after the attacks of 11 September 2001, Canada and America's European NATO partners showed their prompt willingness to support the US against radical Islamic terrorism by activating Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, invoking collective defense.<sup>7</sup> To all intents and purposes, however, they were snubbed by Washington. The Bush administration quickly made it clear that, while it appreciated collective NATO support, it did not want collective decision-making in warfighting against terrorism. It wanted to be in the lead. Yet, ever since President Bush proclaimed the 'War on Terror', varying European allies of the United States have participated in fighting at high levels of force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, both within and outside the NATO framework. They have also contributed to peace-keeping and invested manpower and money into projects for training local military and police forces. Substantial numbers of European soldiers were wounded and have died serving alongside their American allies. At the same time, both in Europe and the United States, serious questions arose about the wisdom of this type of military approach.<sup>8</sup> The intentions might be right, it was argued, but the means were deficient or even vastly counterproductive.

Certainly, there were impressive gains. The hideouts and training facilities of a variety of jihadist groups were obliterated. Many a leader of Al Qa'ida and other jihadist terrorist groups was killed, which at least temporarily caused a weakening of their networks (jihadist leadership, however, unfortunately proved to be refillable). Air attacks by the Americans and their European allies in cooperation with Iraqi and Kurdish forces on the ground have forced Al Qa'ida's most formidable jihadist competitor, ISIS, from large parts of the territory it had managed to occupy in 2013 and 2014.<sup>9</sup> It is expected that ISIS troops will be ousted from the remainder of their Caliphate within a year.<sup>10</sup> Yet allied aims of bringing peace, stability and even democracy to the most afflicted countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria) have by and large been confounded. Hard-fought gains often turned out to be fragile and in need of costly open-ended protection. It is quite uncertain, to say the least, whether the areas

liberated from ISIS will become stable and flourishing anytime soon. Meanwhile, people living in the war zones have had to pay dearly. They had to deal with persistent violence and destruction and also political, economic and social disarray. They were caught between religious and tribal militias fighting each other after central governments broke down, and bore the brunt of attacks by jihadist groups. They were also hit by Russia's attacks against Syrian rebels and by the military campaigns of the United States and its allies against ISIS.<sup>11</sup> NATO should consider the harrowing risk of inflicting 'collateral damage' quite seriously before deciding on its role in the alliance against ISIS.

It proved to be difficult for the allies to persevere in attempts to install and prop up responsible indigenous governments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the results fell far short of initial hopes. It has, indeed, been argued that the War on Terror has been counterproductive because it contributed to state failure rather than stopping and reversing it. State failure is rightly considered to be a boon for terrorist networks and other criminal organizations who want a safe-haven to plot and train without interference. Developments in Iraq, Syria and Libya, where jihadist groups and organized crime are flourishing after the assassination of Qaddafi and the ending of the ill-considered NATO intervention in 2011<sup>12</sup> are frequently put forward as cases in point. Apart from this, the effects of the War on Terror may, finally, be considered part of the explanation for the migration surge towards Europe.

It is undisputed that the flood of images of the War on Terror has made jihadism more rather than less attractive to susceptible minds globally. Jihadist networks, ISIS, Al Qa'ida and their offspring or competitors, became digitally savvy. Their horrendous narratives appealed to disgruntled young Islamic men and women in different parts of the world. The networks interacted with these converts using the rich possibilities of social media and the internet, enabling them to join virtually and instructing them ideologically and practically. Since 2014, thousands of supporters have gone to Syria and Iraq to live in the Caliphate and to participate in the fight against its enemies, even as the local population often (but not always) came to abhor ISIS and resented the influx of foreign fighters. In the following two years, as the fortunes of war gradually turned against ISIS, the number of jihad travellers went down and the number of returnees went up.<sup>13</sup> Authorities in their countries of origin, notably in Europe, became worried for good reason that war-hardened returnees might bring their jihad back home with them. Since 2015<sup>14</sup>, several European countries have been struck by terrorist attacks perpetrated or directed by such jihadi returnees. More attacks were perpetrated by home-grown terrorists who were 'merely' inspired by ISIS and proclaimed allegiance to ISIS's leader Al Baghdadi from a distance. Their choice of arms was often unsophisticated, but the material and immaterial toll of their attacks was substantial, and the scare effect sizeable. Only a minority of the attackers had travelled to Europe in the throng of migrants, but still it remains true that some of them did, and this added to the sensitivity of the migration issue within and between member-states of the European Union.

In sum, contrary to President Trump's opinion, many European NATO allies have in fact participated in countering terrorism at the highest level of military force since the beginning of the War on Terror. Questions must be asked, however, as to the judiciousness of that war and the ways in which it was fought. After the original provocation of 'nine-eleven', the widely acknowledged *casus belli*, armed intervention has by and large failed so far to bring

stability to the involved conflict zones, foremost Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. It has, in contrast, fanned international terrorism, and Europe has been struck far more frequently than the US. All in all, the experiences gained from the War on Terror mainly plead *against* Trump's preferred approach of 'crushing' terrorism. Such experiences should be taken into account in future NATO decision-making. In the Trump era, caution and full attention to counterproductive effects are urgently imperative for his European allies.

NATO certainly can be an asset in the international struggle against terrorism. The organization has over the past fifteen years developed counterterrorism strategies that include a variety of potentially effective instruments at a lower level of military force, as well as diplomatic and political approaches.<sup>15</sup> The Military Concept for Defence against Terrorism adopted in 2012 rests on three pillars: awareness, capabilities and engagement. Awareness mainly concerns producing intelligence reports for NATO members, based on intelligence from national security and intelligence services. One topical area of attention is the threat potentially posed by the (re-)entry of battle-trained ISIS fighters into NATO territory. Obviously, this is a transnational issue for Europe. Civilian security services have stepped up their cooperation correspondingly. The threat can also be interpreted as asking for collective defense, which is NATO's remit. NATO is also tasked with sharing militarily relevant information with key outside actors, 'when appropriate'. The effectiveness of the awareness pillar depends largely on the willingness of national services to share information through a multinational channel. That willingness may be seriously reduced should various US authorities fail to shed their recklessly amateurish approach to confidentiality.<sup>16</sup>

The second pillar is capabilities, meaning the availability of existing NATO expertise for counterterrorism purposes, for instance dismantling Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), protecting vital infrastructure, dealing with Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) threats, and mobilizing Special Operation Commandos to intervene in complex attacks. The third pillar recognizes the relevance and indeed frequent pre-eminence of other international organizations involved in countering terrorism, which means that NATO's role in fighting terrorism should as a rule be supportive rather than directing. NATO must coordinate with such international organizations.<sup>17</sup> Above all, it should proceed from the premise that the final responsibility for preventing and repressing terrorism rests with non-military authorities, frequently at a national rather than international level.

## **Conclusion**

NATO is not obsolete. To the contrary, at no time since the late 1980s has it been easier to make the argument for NATO's continued relevance. President Trump's inclination towards Vladimir Putin notwithstanding, from a European point of view NATO's primary task is to counter the revived geopolitical ambitions of Russia expressed by frequent demonstrations of her military assertiveness along her western borders (from the Arctic on down). NATO must therefore invest in improving its capabilities for collective defense — its traditional core business. Jihadist terrorism is a vicious transnational phenomenon and fighting terrorism can be interpreted as a matter for collective defense, provided the task is defined as mainly facilitating non-military lead organizations, with skill and prudence as guidelines. Mere 'crushing' will aggravate rather than solve the problem.

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<sup>1</sup> CBS, April 12, 2017, 'A Guide to Trump's past comments on NATO', [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com).

<sup>2</sup> The 100-odd personnel members are to gather and analyze intelligence and contribute to defense capability-building in countries to the south and southeast of NATO's home area, for instance Libya and Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> <http://bruegel.org/2016/11/trump-nato-and-european-defence-spending/> concisely explains NATO's budgetary structure. The controversial 2-percent of GDP concerns overall national spending on defense. Members also contribute to NATO's core budget.

<sup>4</sup> As the Baltic states are NATO members, this may become an Article 5 issue.

<sup>5</sup> Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), renamed IS or Islamic State in 2014. Under the Obama administration, the Americans called ISIS ISIL (L for Levant). In 2015, then French President Hollande introduced DAESH, the Arab abbreviation for ISIS.

<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times* 15 January 2017, 'Trump Criticizes NATO and hopes for "Good Deals" with Russia'; Thomas Wright, 'Trump's NATO Article 5 problem', in *Brookings Newsletter*, May 17, 2017. President Trump also considers Saudi Arabia, an exporter of Salafism, a counterterrorism ally.

<sup>7</sup> Sten Rynning, *NATO in Afghanistan: the liberal disconnect*, Stanford University Press, 2012, pp 45; Edgar Buckley, 'Het inroepen van Artikel 5', in: *NAVO Kroniek*, zomer 2006

<sup>8</sup> An overview of Trump's evolving insights on [www.motherjones.com](http://www.motherjones.com): 'What did Donald Trump say on the Iraq War, and when did he say it?'

<sup>9</sup> Russia's military interventions have been focused on supporting the regime of Anwar al Assad rather than defeating ISIS.

<sup>10</sup> 'If this battle for Mosul ends in defeat for ISIS, we shouldn't feel too optimistic about what comes next', a survey in [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk).

<sup>11</sup> For an impression of fatalities caused by Russian and allied bombing in the war against ISIS see <https://airwars.org>.

<sup>12</sup> The attack in Manchester of May 23 seemingly fits this pattern.

<sup>13</sup> As did the numbers of jihadists emerging in conflict-ridden areas as widely apart as Libya and the Philippines.

<sup>14</sup> The 'trend' actually started earlier, as instanced by the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels.

<sup>15</sup> Summary in 'NATO's military concept for defence against terrorism', on [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int), discussion in Juliette Bird, 'NATO's Role in Counter-Terrorism', in: *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 9, no. 2, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Specifically the unauthorized divulging of intelligence provided by 'third parties', for instance the identity of the Manchester attackers.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. the United Nations, the OPCW, the OSCE, Interpol and Europol.