

Trumps visit and the NATO summit

Trump's visit to the UK on July 13th and 14th follows on from his attendance at the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels. Earlier this year NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg laid out the five key objectives for the summit: further strengthen the transatlantic bond, build on NATO's work with partner nations to fight terrorism, strengthen NATO's Black Sea presence and step up efforts against cyberattacks and hybrid threats.

Like most international diplomacy, NATO summits usually involve a high degree of consensus, with outcomes largely determined in advance. The 2018 summit may be different. During his election campaign Trump was less than enthusiastic about NATO, questioning commitments to mutual defence and arguing that the US's partners were not paying their way. As President he has overseen a continuing push to make other NATO members commit to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence. This has been partly successful with eight NATO countries meeting that target this year. Across the alliance defence spending is rising faster than inflation; 4.3% in 2017, 3.3% in 2016.

NATO was founded in 1949 – the initials standing for North Atlantic Treaty Organisation - a military alliance between 12 North American and European countries. During the cold war it was defined politically in opposition to the Warsaw pact. Between 1949 and 1990 there was standardisation between member armed forces, joint training and exercises it carried out no military operations. With the end of the cold war NATO began to expand – its current membership of 29 includes a number of ex-Warsaw pact nations. At the same time it has repeatedly been involved in active military operations.

NATO is a nuclear alliance and insists that it will remain so as long as nuclear weapons exist. It argues that for its nuclear weapons to be credible it is essential to retain the option of first use; in other words a pre-emptive nuclear strike. New developments, such as Trump's mooted 'Space Force' are in large part about updating the infrastructure to enable pre-emptive use. The systems already exist, but the cost of the further developments required for maintaining a technological lead is high. This is a major factor in the US's desire for its NATO allies to spend more on defence.

However, space and the revamp of the US nuclear arsenal is just one reason why Trump wants NATO allies to share the burden of cost. His presidency has seen a strategic shift in US policy from a focus on the 'War on Terror' to interstate conflict. The number of US troops in Europe is up. The NATO emphasis on the Black Sea reflects a view that the Caucasus, rich in minerals, oil and gas is of vital strategic importance. At the same time military activity is up dramatically. Over the eight years that Obama held office the US dropped an average of 30 bombs a day. Under Trump the rate is up to 140 bombs a day. There are now 16,000 NATO troops in

Afghanistan – and bombing levels are at the highest levels since 2012 at the end of Obama’s ‘surge’.

After the debacle of the G7 in Canada what are the prospects for Brussels? As Trump imposes new tariffs on European imports is the summit aim of strengthening transatlantic bonds even a remote possibility? Policy differences between European countries and the US are not new but Trump’s presidency has deepened the rift. Even Britain, which normally sides with the Americans, has openly disagreed with Trump’s imposition of new sanctions on Iran.

NATO has continued to present a united front but on finance, defence budgets and strategy this is under strain. Writing for the Guardian website just three weeks before the summit, Jens Stoltenberg called for NATO members to strive to maintain unity. In the same piece Stoltenberg notes the increased spending by the US on its forces in Europe – up 40% since Trump assumed office.

The contrast between sharp policy disagreements, a developing trade war and the united façade of the alliance is striking. Military and economic pressures are deeply enmeshed. NATO has become the USA’s first choice for military action.

The US spends well over a trillion dollars each year on defence (preparation for war) – more than the next eight countries combined. So while the US continues to decline in terms of its economic strength relative to other nations it remains militarily preeminent. When asked in May 2018 for his position on the NATO members that spend less than 2% of GDP on defence Trump responded ‘they’ll be dealt with’. US leverage over the other members of NATO, and particularly the biggest economies, is mediated through the size, strength and economic muscle of the military industrial complex – in which European firms like Airbus, Leonardo and BAE Systems are deeply involved. Although NATO insists that its rationale is collective defence against external military threats, the glue that holds it together – even in the age of Trump – is a shared commitment to the status quo, to fortress Europe and to a hierarchical, deeply unequal economic system. With Trump at the party Brussels may not be quite the stage-managed farce behind razor wire barricades of recent years. There may be public fractiousness but the likelihood of splits and defections or strategic policy shifts remains low.

What NATO does and what is decided in Brussels really matters for the citizens of Europe and the world. For example, funding for NATO intervention in Afghanistan for another six years until 2024 is high on the agenda. But NATO has a particular salience for Scotland. The Trident Nuclear weapons based at Faslane are a key part of NATO’s nuclear arsenal. The replacement programme for Trident is underway and is expected to cost well over £200 billion.

There is opposition to Trident on both sides of the constitutional debate in Scotland. Moreover, the SNP have been consistently anti-trident; indeed Nicola Sturgeon was the lead speaker at the large march and rally held by the Scrap Trident Coalition in April 2015. For more than 30 years the SNP maintained

opposition to the NATO alliance, however at its conference in October 2012 this policy was reversed. There was fierce debate and two MSP's left the party. Since then, however, debate about NATO has gone off the boil. Indeed there are many indications that the role and function of NATO as a nuclear alliance is not well understood by the general public. I would argue that it's time for NATO to return as an issue of public debate. NATO membership is a critical factor in any strategy to scrap Trident and it looms over debates on austerity and military spending. How can we scrap Trident and remain part of a nuclear alliance? But NATO membership also constrains options for change and signals a future defined by increasing arms spending, walls instead of open borders, continuing wars and failure to tackle climate change. It's time for a new foreign policy and in that policy there's no room for NATO.

Pete Cannell
23 June 2018