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NATO'S "MACRONIAN" PERIL

Real or Exaggerated?

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Introduction: The (Brain) Death of NATO?

In November 2019, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, granted an interview to the British journal, *The Economist*. That last pre-COVID-19 autumn was a season in which many Western leaders' thoughts were on the future of the transatlantic alliance, seen by quite a few of them to be experiencing more than its usual amount of turmoil. There were four reasons for this heightened alliance angst (discussed below), so there could be nothing terribly surprising about the French president giving voice to what was thought to be wrong with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nor was there anything surprising about the media outlet to which he unburdened himself. *The Economist* had been Macron's biggest cheerleader since his surprise election some two years earlier. Indeed, such was his rock-star appeal to the magazine's editorial team that they had accorded the youthful president no fewer than three cover-page appearances during the second half of 2017 alone.[1]

Macron was hailed by *The Economist*'s "small-l" liberal editorialists as a breath of *air frais*. For he was regarded as being one of those rare French leaders who had a reputation as an atlanticist who is "fully committed to NATO and knows that the United States is France's and Europe's natural ally" (Tiersky 2018, 94).[2] Moreover, he was known to be a reformer who would brook no nonsense from those in France bent on nourishing the sacred cows pasturing in the overly protectionist and *dirigiste* French political paddock, one where liberals had long been routinely taken to task for being the closest thing this secular republic could have to devil worshippers (see Julienne 2001; Leterre 2000). What Macron happened to be thinking meshed well with what *The Economist*'s editorialists were thinking: All agreed that when thoughts turned to the current state and future prospects of the venerable transatlantic alliance, there was ample cause for worry.

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Even though COVID-19 had already begun its sinister spread from its epicenter in Wuhan, China, no one had an inkling of what was to come in the very near term. Instead, leaders could vent their anxiety about other matters, which, in light of what was shortly to befall their countries, can now seem almost quaint. What so upset Macron, judging from his remarks in the interview, was the perception of grave danger facing a Europe whose integrative juices had been steadily desiccated by a myriad of economic, political, and demographic challenges that had arisen over the past decade. The challenges were such as to lead some analysts to fear that the European Union (EU) itself was in danger of falling apart (Kirchick 2018). Brexit was an obvious portent, but the problem was far more serious than just the British exit that *The Economist* and Macron had both deplored. Something far worse loomed: Europe itself risked being left to its own devices by a United States (US) that had, since World War II, installed itself as an omnipresent fixture in its regional security but was now, under President Donald J. Trump, showing signs of wanting to decamp from the Old Continent.

It was in this context that Macron commented on NATO's geopolitical health that will go down in history as among the "frankest" things ever said about the

As we will see, Trump was obviously one of the reasons for Macron's (and other allied leaders') trepidation. Indeed, it might be tempting to conclude that now with Joe Biden dwelling at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, all will be well once more in the transatlantic alliance. No doubt, there is something to this tempting thought, for NATO has unquestionably demonstrated a remarkable degree of "resilience" in the past, leading to the assumption that it will muster enough of this same quality in the future to sustain itself as the preeminent institutional feature of transatlantic defense and security affairs. Still, the alliance does, these days, face a set of real challenges, most of which would exist even if Trump had never come to power in January 2017. Those challenges are fourfold and will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

The first of these concerns the ability of the US, no matter by whom led, to continue to support the globalized economic and security order—call it the "Liberal International Order" (LIO)—to anything like the same extent as it had in the years since that order's creation in the aftermath of World War II. The second challenge concerns the long-running saga regarding the prospects and consequences of the European "autonomy" aspiration touted by Macron and some other Europeans

the percentage share of gross domestic product allocated to their respective defense budgets. In the event, 2 percent has come to be the magic figure that attests to an ally's doing "enough" to carry its share of the burden, but it is not a metric that flatters most alliance members, with only a third of them managing to have hit that target before the arrival of the pandemic, which will certainly put further strains on the capacity of member states to increase spending on the military (Webber, Sperling, and Smith 2021, 71).

Before Trump, presidential finger-wagging was just that. Few "underspenders" really sensed there to be much if any downside risk of their choosing to allocate relatively larger shares of public finances to budgetary envelopes other than defense. In the words of three eminent alliance watchers, what Trump did was "criticize NATO in a manner unparalleled among previous American presidents" (Webber, Sperling, and Smith 2021, 3). In so doing, he injected a new and disturbing element into their calculations, predicated upon the thought that perhaps he was serious when he warned that unless they spent more, the US *itself*

shared (which it did not). Another of those illusions was that a liberal power of such

time when it was still possible to miss the geostrategic significance of China's rise, only Europe was said to be capable of making or breaking that dispensation some knew as US hegemony. The latter, to function, required others to want to follow US leadership—exactly the thing that a rebarbative France was contesting. Thus,

democracies (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). NATO has been conceptualized over the years in different ways. At one extreme can be found those who regard it as a collective-defense entity conceived *solely* to safeguard its members from the threat of great-power aggression. At the other extreme are those who see it as something truly new under the global security sun, that is, a community of like-minded states held together far more by shared liberal-democratic values than by traditional security worries. According to this second way of looking at things, NATO has always been much more than a marriage of security convenience between partners possessed of interest-based reasons for cooperation; it is a community of shared values, the foremost of which are human rights, the rule of law, and especially, democratic governance.

This is why, once the end of the Cold War removed (temporarily, as it turned out) concerns about Russia as a threat, some analysts could be confident that NATO was not destined to go out of existence, for as one of them put it at the start of the 1990s, "it is a fair bet that the values engendered in Western cooperation in security affairs will be maintained in the years ahead, based on the assumption that these values have become internalized in the systems of Western alliance nations" (see Boyer 1993). Now, it has always been true that the community-of-values argument needed to be taken with a grain of salt, given the charter membership in the alliance of António de Oliveira Salazar's Portugal, to say nothing of the occasional democratic "lapses" experienced during the Cold War by the first pair of new members, Turkey and Greece. But *la nécessité oblige*, and sometimes during the Cold War, it was imperative to overlook a bit of value "straying" for the greater sake of security against the Soviets.

What was *not* so easily acceptable is what came as a result of NATO's great post-Cold War experiment with enlargement. That experiment was intended to contribute to spreading the democratic "zone of peace" eastward in Europe; in the first instance (in 1999), by the incorporation into alliance ranks of three former Soviet allies: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. SubseqJ -0.0341 Td (not)Tj /T1_29d40.00 5

Despite what so many today, and not just in Russia, seem to want to belie /T1_29d40
about NATO's expansion, initial enthusiasm for it had fo0 (Aust)Tc 0 Tc /T1_2e1 Tf 0 Tc 0.886 0 Td ( )

inclined Democrats. The second trend is the recognition that is setting in in the US, namely that allies might just be useful things to have vis-à-vis China. And, with respect to the latter, in US thinking, nothing tops the utility of NATO allies.[15]

The question that cannot be answered, and the one on which this chapter concludes, is whether China will prove a unifying or divisive force within the transatlantic community. It used to be argued by some European policy intellectuals that, unlike the US, "Europe doesn't do China" (Danchev 2005, 433). Recently, however, there is evidence that Europeans themselves are growing aware that if they do not "do" China, then China may well "do" them.[16]

In the end, there is some irony in the quondam pessimist John Mearsheimer's speculation that China may yet prove to be the allies' *deus ex machina*, quieting their fear about an American defection from European security and defense. This

Notes

1 The first appearance came in the 17 June issue, which featured a picture of Macron walking on water, in support of its editorial "Europe's Saviour?" The second was on 30 September with Macron's visage advertising a special nine-page report on France bearing the hopeful title "Regeneration." The third appearance came in the year-ending double issue, which lauded France as the "Formidable Nation."
2 Also favorably taking the measure of the French president is Drozdiak (2020).
3 Also see, on Franco-German differences over transatlantic and European security, Meimeth and Schmidt (forthcoming) and Vincze (2021).
4 Also see, for that era's wave of criticism of American foreign policy, Katzenstein and Keohane (2007).
5 A useful metric for gauging the quality of ties between the US and its European allies is the "transatlantic scorecard" published quarterly by the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe as part of a transatlantic initiative it co-sponsors with the Robert Bosch Stiftung in Germany. Recent quarterly scorecards all attest to the consensus view that transatlantic relations could benefit greatly from an upgrade. These quarterly scorecards are available at www.brookings.edu/research/trans-atlantic-scorecard-april-2020/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=86981260.
6 For a caution regarding potential misuse of this ill-defined term, see Wilkinson (1999).
7 As argued forcefully in Kagan (2018).
8 For reflections of this concern, exacerbated by worry about an Obama "pivot to Asia" redounding negative31.7zf0a6 tI s0e 0 Td tsterm,

11 Turkey joined the alliance in 1952, at the same time as Greece. Some analysts hold Turkey to be far more of a problem than either Hungary or Poland—or the two Visegrád

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