Trump’s Transatlantic Crisis

Will this be the one that finishes off NATO?

by HAL BRANDS and PETER FEAVER

It is hard to pin down just which aspect of President Trump’s visit to Europe in July 2018 contributed most to the transatlantic panic that followed.

Perhaps it was the sense of defeat snatched from the jaws of victory. Prior to and during the NATO summit in Brussels, alliance members had given Trump nearly everything he had demanded—contributing more troops to the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan, affirming their commitment to raise military spending and improve readiness for a potential conflict with Moscow, and expanding NATO’s counterterrorism training mission in Iraq. And yet Trump came to Europe loaded for bear, effectively pummeling its leaders and leaving them perplexed and dazed.

Perhaps it was his startling public attack on British Prime Minister Theresa May at her moment of greatest political vulnerability. Perhaps it was the jarring contrast between all that and the fawning credulousness he displayed a few days later toward one of the world’s most vicious tyrants, Russia’s Vladimir Putin. Perhaps it was the realization that the whole episode was basically a carbon copy of what had happened a month before, when Trump went to a Group of 7 summit in Canada and then a day later showered praise on another murderous dictator, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un.

Hal Brands teaches at Johns Hopkins-SAIS and is a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Peter Feaver is a professor of political science and public policy at Duke University, where he directs the American Grand Strategy program and the Triangle Institute for Security Studies.
Whatever the cause, the transatlantic alliance entered the one-year countdown to two historic milestones—the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Washington Treaty, in April 2019, then the 75th anniversary of D-Day, in June 2019—facing what many observers considered an unprecedented rift. “The foundations of the alliance are crumbling,” wrote Robert Kagan after the Brussels summit. “Things will not be okay.”

Yet how unprecedented is the current trouble? Veterans of the Suez crisis in 1956—when the British and French double-crossed Washington by attacking Nasser’s Egypt, only to be brutally brought to heel by an enraged Dwight Eisenhower—might be forgiven for thinking they had experienced the true nadir of transatlantic relations. There were low points in every decade following Suez. A nuclear-weapon delivery-system kerfuffle in the early 1960s that came to be known as the Skybolt crisis created enormous tension between the U.S. and Great Britain. Bitter economic disputes resulted from the collapse of the Bretton Woods financial system in 1971 and the OPEC oil crisis in 1973–74. Anguished strategic debates over medium-range nuclear missiles and the nuclear freeze in the 1970s and 1980s threatened to tear Western European countries asunder. Finger-pointing over failures to address ethnic conflict and failed states characterized much of the 1990s. And rancor over Iraq was a key feature of the 2000s. The story of transatlantic tensions is a familiar one.

Still, it is clear that the current crisis is occurring amid several deeper shifts and strains that have been building for years. America’s most valuable alliance may not be on the verge of collapse, but its foundations look increasingly shaky.

**BEND BUT DON’T BREAK**

The particular issues that have divided NATO have changed over time, but one constant has been recurring crises that seemingly threaten to break up the alliance.

This pattern has owed much to personality clashes between the likes of LBJ and de Gaulle, Helmut Schmidt and Jimmy Carter, and George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac, as well as all the other idiosyncrasies that influence statecraft. Yet more fundamentally, it reflects structural imbalances at the heart of the alliance— imbalances of power, geography, and political culture.

NATO must bridge a power gap greater than those that any other alliance in modern history has faced. It contains the mightiest state in the world (the United States) as well as some of the smallest and weakest (Luxembourg and the Baltics). It contains enormously wealthy nations (America and the northern European states) as well as nations with high poverty levels and deep fiscal woes (Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece). It encompasses states enjoying the geopolitical blessing of defensible borders far from historical enemies, as well as states that have been veritable highways for invasion and conquest. More recently, it has included states that perceive an intense security threat from Russia in the east as well as those whose most serious security threats come from jihadists, migrants, and other challenges out of NATO’s south.

For most of its history, the alliance has included both dictators and democrats, not to mention stable parliamentary and presidential systems as well as countries trapped in a never-ending cycle of short-lived coalition governments. Its members have consisted of colonial masters seeking to hold on to decaying empires, and also a hegemon that has long defined itself as an anti-colonial power even as it has built a vast informal “empire” of its own. These deep differences have given rise to enduring conflicts across an array of diplomatic, military, and economic issues; those conflicts have periodically triggered intra-alliance crises that are invariably described in breathless tones.

Yet the flip side of recurring crises is recurring recoveries. Even if there are differences of strategic perspective, at bottom there has been a shared threat that gives the alliance cohesion—whether Soviet expansionism, the economic travails of capitalism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction to rogue actors, or terrorist networks seeking to trigger a religious war. As time passed, the alliance also benefited from a deep institutionalization that promoted routinized collaboration and insulated the relationship from the political disputes that erupted every few years. On top of all of this, the alliance benefited from inertia. The longer it went on, the more it seemed destined to go on, because none of the members could imagine what it would be like to live in a world without NATO.

Finally, the alliance showed a remarkable degree of adaptability. It managed the transition from an American nuclear monopoly to a configuration of nuclear have-s and have-nots. It navigated the shift from an era of American economic dominance and European economic destitution to one of deep economic integration and even rivalry. The alliance pivoted from periods of intense hostility with Moscow during the 1950s and early 1960s, to a period of negotiation and détente in the 1970s, and back again to hostility during the late 1970s and 1980s; it subsequently shifted from confronting the Warsaw Pact to absorbing its former members. NATO needed to change to survive...
in a fluid world, and it generally succeeded in doing so.

These underlying strengths were mutually reinforcing and compensating. When one was challenged, the power of the others could make up for the resulting vulnerability. Some international-relations theorists missed this fact when they predicted that the Soviet collapse would cause the collapse of the alliance. On the contrary, the alliance adapted and in some ways deepened, leading ultimately to its expansion and the undertaking of sustained, out-of-area military missions that few of the post–World War II founders could have anticipated. In sum, the nearly seven-decade history of the alliance is one of a structure continually bending but never breaking.

**CAN IT SURVIVE A DISRUPTOR?**

Yet no one does disruption like Donald Trump, and his ascendancy has ushered in a new and undeniably rough patch for transatlantic relations. During the 2016 campaign, Trump used America’s European allies as political punching bags. The pattern extended into the first months of the presidency, with Trump refusing to deliver boilerplate endorsements of the importance and inviolability of the alliance, criticizing longtime friends such as the United Kingdom in the wake of terrorist attacks on its soil, launching political attacks on vulnerable leaders such as Merkel, and persistently seeking close relations with the very country—Vladimir Putin’s Russia—that was threatening the alliance’s security. The rest of the Trump administration tried to cover for the apparent presidential hostility, urging the allies to ignore the rhetoric and focus instead on policy substance.

This approach initially seemed prudent. Even as Trump harangued and baited longtime allies on the phone, in one-on-one meetings, and via Twitter, the Pentagon not only maintained but increased funding for the European Deterrence Initiative. Leading GOP internationalists such as Senator John McCain reassured Europeans that the partnership was as vital as ever.

But as Trump’s presidency unfolded, rhetorical conflict led to sharpening conflicts over substance. In June 2017, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change, despite the pleas of European officials. In early 2018, Trump replaced Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with Mike Pompeo, and then replaced National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster with John Bolton. In each case, Trump replaced an establishment figure who had gone to great lengths to reassure the allies with men best known for taking strong policy stands diametrically opposite to European preferences.

Policy followed personnel. At the beginning of May, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), even though the United Kingdom, France, and Germany had spent months lobbying Trump not to do so and making some efforts to accommodate the president’s critiques of that agreement. Later that month, Trump launched his long-threatened trade war by announcing punitive tariffs on steel and aluminum, which hit close NATO allies particularly hard. Then came the collapse of the G-7 summit, open attacks on German Prime Minister Merkel, and talk of further escalation of the trade war—all of which intensified calls within Europe for “resistance” against a supposedly rogue superpower. In this context, Trump’s performance in Brussels, London, and Helsinki in July 2018—when he again deliberately picked a fight with NATO, took aim at a wounded friend in need (this time Theresa May), and then jetted off for a chummy meeting with an aggressive despot—was shocking but not at all surprising. For
The occasional diplomatic niceties could no longer hide what was evident to all: President Trump did not particularly like or trust his transatlantic partners, and the feelings were mutual.

good measure, the president then resumed questioning of NATO’s Article 5, which requires all member nations to come to the defense of any one of them under actual attack—wondering aloud why the United States should come to the defense of Montenegro, NATO’s newest member, should it come under military assault.

The occasional diplomatic niceties could no longer hide what was evident to all: President Trump did not particularly like or trust his transatlantic partners, and the feelings were mutual.

WHY THIS TIME MAY BE MORE OF THE SAME

And yet, and yet—there are several reasons to think that this, too, may pass. For starters, the policy disputes—as distinct from the rhetoric—have not been as damaging or as central to the security rationale of the alliance as were some of the Cold War crises. During the Suez affair, the British and French launched an ill-fated military conflict against the will of President Eisenhower, only to suffer the lash of Ike’s economic warfare, which almost bankrupted the Bank of England and essentially destroyed French and British influence in the Middle East. The damage then to what London and Paris deemed their vital interests was greater than anything Trump has yet wrought. Similarly, the debates over the decision to deploy new ground-launched cruise missiles and intermediate-range bal-

istic missiles to Europe during the Carter and Reagan years were so charged because they touched the very heart of the security guarantee: how best to extend American power to deter a Soviet attack. Europe cares about the Iran nuclear deal today, but not nearly as much as it cared about the stability of extended deterrence and the Soviet–U.S. nuclear balance.

It is also obvious, and somewhat reassuring, that the chief complaints on either side are as old as the alliance itself. From the start, Americans grumbled that their European and Canadian partners were not doing as much as they could in their own defense. Every president since has found reason to remind the allies that Washington is bearing a disproportionate share of the burden. In response, Europeans have been voluble in expressing their concerns about American judgment and dependability. From the European perspective, this was a major purpose of the alliance—to “keep the Americans in” lest U.S. policy drift in an isolationist or irresponsible fashion. European leaders have long voiced skepticism about the U.S. commitment to the alliance—recall the frequently voiced Cold War concern about whether a president would really trade Boston for Bonn—while also complaining about how hard it is to rein in the American cowboy. All the actors have delivered the same lines in the Trump era, albeit with unusual passion.

There also remain powerful geopolitical shock absorbers that can limit the disruption Trump causes, just as the looming Soviet threat ultimately kept the alliance together during the Cold War. The Europeans have all the reason in the world to seek to pacify the American president. From a cold realpolitik perspective, Europe simply needs America more than the public commentary seems to appreciate. Europe’s internal travails make it clear that Europeans cannot manage continental problems, let alone other global and regional challenges, without U.S. assistance. Similarly, when it comes to confronting Putin, Europe has nowhere else to go: Without U.S. support, the Europeans would be utterly incapable of defending the continent’s eastern frontiers from a revanchist Russia if Putin actually ordered an invasion. Over the longer term, it is possible to imagine a hegemonic, illiberal China filling any global leadership void left by a retreating America; it is much harder to imagine that such a development would actually serve European interests. No matter how unhappy the Europeans might be with
Trump, they know that the alternatives to continued cooperation with Washington are worse.

Fortunately, alliance cohesion is not just a matter of “you can’t do better than me”; there are real security interests that incentivize continued cooperation. The threats NATO faces are not as compelling as those faced during the Cold War. But they are much more compelling than those of the 1990s, when the alliance struggled to achieve unity in confronting humanitarian crises.

Russia is not merely a failing state with nuclear weapons, as was the case during the 1990s. Russia is a failing state with nuclear weapons led by a hyper-nationalist who has slipped the bonds of democratic constraints and is unfettered as he works through his list of grievances and indulges his appetite for risk. Iran’s apparent nuclear ambitions, missile programs, and Middle Eastern expansionism threaten U.S. and European interests; the Islamic State and other jihadist groups have attacked both U.S. and European targets.

Significant differences in threat perception remain, of course, particularly as one moves from the states most threatened by Russia in Eastern Europe to those more insulated from the military threat in the West. The former face a potent mix of conventional invasion threats, hybrid-warfare threats, and political warfare in the form of cyber intrusions and electoral interference. The latter primarily have to worry about cyber attacks and political meddling. The former group has no choice but to fight if a NATO–Russia conflict breaks out; if recent polling is any indication, the latter group may be more hesitant. NATO will thus face continuing challenges in determining which threats to prioritize and how. Nonetheless, the rationale for the alliance—that its members can serve their national interests better through close cooperation on shared threats—is truer today than at any time since the Soviet collapse.

Finally, some key sources of the resilience that has sustained NATO over the years are still there. NATO is as thickly institutionalized as ever, and just as strong is the inertia of seven decades of muddling through. That institutionalized cooperation has been evident in Afghanistan, among other places, where several NATO members have contributed additional forces to accompany the U.S. “minisurge” announced by President Trump in August 2017. And while political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are willing to express their complaints more openly, the elite consensus on NATO’s value appears to remain largely intact. It is telling that virtually every member of Trump’s own national-security team has found occasion to express the historic bipartisan consensus on the importance of the alliance, often doing so after a particularly inflammatory Trump tweet. At the popular level, opinion polling shows that Americans think just as highly of NATO as they normally have. Trump and other true-believing “America Firsters” look at it differently. Yet most Americans, and most influential people who have thought deeply about the issue, still adhere to the traditional view: The alliance has benefited all its members and is worth preserving.

WHY THIS TIME MAY BE DIFFERENT

The residual strengths of the alliance are impressive, but so are the pressures battering NATO. Trump’s hostility is undoubtedly causing great strain and confronting NATO with an unprecedented challenge—a “leader of the free world” who seems set on deconstructing the historical core of the free-world coalition, perhaps in concert with some of that coalition’s most dangerous enemies. Yet there are also a number of deeper structural issues threatening to pull the alliance apart. It would be comforting to think that NATO will simply surmount this crisis as it has surmounted others, but that might well be Pollyannaish given the nature, severity, and multiplicity of the problems it confronts today.
For starters, while the complaints being exchanged across the Atlantic are familiar, they actually have more merit now than at any previous time. From the U.S. perspective, burden-sharing has reached an unprecedented crisis when a country as wealthy as Germany contributes so little real military power relevant to the alliance’s collective defense mission—and bristles at suggestions it ought to spend more than 1.5 percent of GDP on defense. Nor is this simply a German problem. In 2017, the RAND Corporation assessed that America’s three most powerful European allies—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—would each struggle to generate and sustain a single brigade for alliance operations in Eastern Europe.

This relates to another factor that is different this time around: the lack of even a minimal presidential commitment to Atlanticism. Previous intra-alliance disputes had the feel of a family fight, where everyone had a shared identity if not a shared perspective. Even presidents whose behavior greatly concerned many Europeans—Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, George W. Bush after 9/11—valued or came to value the special bonds between America and NATO. What scares the Europeans most about President Trump may be that he wants no part of that family identity. He seems genuinely to believe that allies are more trouble than they are worth, and he seems especially to detest Atlanticism. Just as bad, he seems to believe that allies (apart from Israel) merit no better treatment than committed American adversaries. If the American president does indeed believe that there is no “special relationship” with the Atlantic allies, if he is truly determined to treat them no better, and perhaps worse, than any other country, then that truly is unprecedented.

Equally unprecedented is the president’s open antipathy for Article 5. To be clear, Americans have always had doubts about fighting a war—particularly a nuclear war—to defend the allies. After the Vietnam War, only 36 percent of Americans believed that “it was important for the United States to make and keep commitments to other nations.” Yet U.S. presidents have traditionally seen it as their role to reassure the Europeans that the superpower would nonetheless come riding to the rescue—to act as the calcium in NATO’s backbone. Trump, however, is playing precisely the opposite role, by repeatedly casting doubt on whether Washington would or should intervene to defend its allies, and by warning that doing so could lead to “World War III.” These comments are having an effect: Observers in Poland and elsewhere are openly doubting whether Article 5 remains credible. If the American president continues to act as the chief doubter, rather than the chief defender, of NATO’s collective security bargain, then the alliance could become a dead letter in the eyes of its members and its opponents alike even without any explicit crisis.

Trump’s persistent questioning of Article 5 also points to another factor that is different today: This president seems uniquely resistant to the forces of tradition, conventional wisdom, and on-the-job learning that have helped reconsolidate the alliance in times of strain. The George W. Bush administration occasionally deprecated the value of NATO during the early stages of the global war on terror (and earlier), but the president eventually came to depend on the alliance in dealing with Afghanistan, Iran, and other matters. President Obama was not a committed Atlanticist when he took office; he downgraded relations with the United Kingdom and styled himself the “first Pacific president.” But as Obama was exposed to the enduring logic of the alliance and came to appreciate its critical role in advancing American priorities, his reliance on NATO also increased.

Trump, however, takes particular pleasure in bucking tradition and rejecting inherited insights. More broadly, his foreign policy is becoming more abrasive and disruptive as his presidency unfolds. If one of the reasons NATO has endured is that even American presidents who were...
initially skeptical of its value have gradually reverted to the mean, then Trump's aversion to reversion bodes ill indeed. In fact, Trump's distinctive traits are undercutting aspects of the institutional cooperation that observers have come to expect from NATO. There is little disagreement within the alliance that Russian information warfare and electoral meddling constitute severe threats, but Trump's refusal to take that issue seriously has made the matter far more difficult to address. Likewise, there is an emerging sense in many European capitals that China's unfair trade practices demand a coordinated response. Yet the fact that Trump has chosen to launch a trade war against Europe has made such coordination impossible. NATO may be a uniquely institutionalized alliance, but sustained cooperation on the most sensitive issues still requires some degree of political consensus—and today, that consensus appears wanting.

Trump, then, is not simply one more entry in the long list of leaders whose personality quirks have strained NATO; his views and his proclivities are testing the alliance in ways it was not designed to be tested. Even after Trump departs the scene, Europeans will remember that the U.S. political system produced a leader so dismissive of decades of partnership. Even setting Trump aside, however, NATO is undergoing a series of transitions and trials that will challenge its future cohesion.

One is generational. There is a noticeable transformation in NATO's human capital under way, as political power transfers from generations of American strategic leaders for whom Europe was the partner of first resort to a new generation that does not have that reflex because it did not receive a geopolitical education during the Cold War. In this sense, Trump, although chronologically a child of the Cold War, may be a harbinger of things to come.

The dots are visible: a decline in the study of European languages and politics within American universities, and the concurrent rise of Middle Eastern studies after 9/11 and Chinese/Asian studies more recently; a decline in the prestige and visibility of transatlantic institutions and professional/educational exchanges; and a decline in the prestige of Europe-oriented assignments for careers in national security. Since personnel is policy, these dots may eventually connect up to a picture that is bleak for the future of transatlantic relations. On the European side, similar dynamics are emerging. If current trends continue and Trump drives foreign students away from U.S. universities, then future European leaders may also have less attachment to the transatlantic identity.

NATO is also suffering a series of political upheavals of which Trump is more symptom than cause. As Celeste Wallander recently argued, chief among these is an internal authoritarian backlash. During the Cold War, NATO had dictatorships, but they were right-wing, anti-Communist regimes with no ideological sympathy for a Communist enemy. Today, however, quasi-authoritarian regimes in countries such as Hungary and Turkey are dominated by illiberal populists at the same time that the external threat—Russia—is itself governed by an illiberal populist. Their ideological affinities are already complicating European efforts to hold sanctions against Russia in place and are likely to have equally divisive effects should NATO's confrontation with Moscow sharpen. Over the longer term, it may well provoke an “agonizing reappraisal” over the alliance's post–Cold War identity as a group of states that share not just geopolitical interests but common democratic values.

Even today, it is questionable whether countries such as Hungary and Turkey really qualify as allies. It is widely suspected that Russian intelligence has penetrated the Hungarian government sufficiently to put at risk any NATO secrets shared with Budapest. Turkey, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan,
has agreed to purchase advanced Russian air-defense systems designed to shoot down NATO's most sophisticated aircraft, and it often seems to be positioning itself in outright opposition to U.S. policy. No president of a NATO ally had ever publicly threatened to “bury” U.S. troops, but Erdogan made precisely this threat in reference to American forces in Syria in early 2018.

Unfortunately, NATO's political crisis goes beyond the issue of authoritarian backsliding. It also concerns the unprecedented political instability that is plaguing so many members of the alliance. Within the United States, there has never been a time since World War II when both major political parties were in such deep turmoil. Yet American political weakness is eclipsed by the weakness of the major governing coalitions in key NATO states.

For the first time in decades, one can plausibly foresee how heads of government in perhaps a half-dozen of NATO's leading states might be forced out of office or rendered politically impotent by domestic opposition. One can also plausibly see how governments in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and other key states could take a hard anti-NATO turn depending on the outcomes of recent or upcoming elections. Nearly every member of the alliance is experiencing domestic upheaval of a type that is consuming the energy and attention of leaders and leaving NATO highly vulnerable to the vagaries of electoral politics.

Finally, if the political pillars of NATO have become alarmingly shaky, the geopolitical pillars have also been weakening. From a European perspective, the alliance has long rested on a belief that Washington can be counted on to provide leadership on the issues Europeans care about most. Yet that belief, in the eyes of many Europeans, has grown steadily less justifiable in this century. Under George W. Bush, the Iraq war produced concerns that America would address its own security challenges in ways that Europeans viewed as dangerous and destabilizing. Under Barack Obama, there were widespread concerns that the United States was turning inward in ways that would have pernicious implications for Europe. U.S. military inaction in Syria in 2013 in response to Bashar al-Assad's chemical-weapons attacks against his own population had a particularly traumatic effect on French views of American purpose and credibility. As one French official privately remarked, Paris's estimation of U.S. policy changed not in 2017 but in 2013. The reason Trump so worries many European leaders, in other words, is that he seems to represent a frightening culmination of disturbing trends in American strategy.

From a U.S. perspective, too, one of the alliance's chief geopolitical selling points has become steadily less persuasive. Today, the gravest threat to America's geopolitical standing and interests is not in Europe, as it was during the Cold War. It is not even in the Middle East, where European countries possess real regional expertise and can offer meaningful (if still insufficient) military assistance. It is in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, where few if any of the NATO allies are poised to play a major role—militarily, at least—in meeting the Chinese challenge. This shift is occurring, moreover, as Europe's share of global GDP and defense spending shrinks relative to that of the nations of the Asia-Pacific.

This hardly makes NATO irrelevant, for the United States will ultimately need all the friends it can get as part of a global democratic coalition committed to countering the influence of an authoritarian China. But it does mean that the success of U.S. strategy will hinge more and more on what America does outside of
Europe and with only moderate European assistance. Trump is wrong if he thinks America does not need Europe. He is not wrong if he thinks Europe matters less than it once did.

**TOO SOON TO PANIC, NOT TOO SOON TO WORRY**

So how do the various strengths and vulnerabilities of the alliance net out? Is this time really different, or just more of the same?

In the near term, it remains unlikely that NATO will experience a fatal or near-fatal rupture, because the underlying logic of the alliance remains compelling, because it has weathered numerous and perhaps even worse crises before, and because some key sources of cohesion persist even amid the current crisis. The most likely scenario for the next two to three years is that the alliance will muddle through as it has muddled through before, with American Atlanticists inside and outside the administration trying to limit the fallout from Trump’s enmity, and Europeans trying to protect their interests and dignity while nonetheless tempering the urge for a showdown that could escalate in counterproductive ways.

Here the unprecedented role played by Trump may even provide added resilience. When members of the administration and Trump’s own party signal that they understand the importance of allies even if he does not, they encourage allies to keep their heads down and avoid taking steps that would make matters worse. Better just to wait for the passing of a septuagenarian one-of-a-kind.

Yet simply waiting Trump out may be not be possible—and it may not be enough. For one thing, how much wreckage Trump causes will depend on whether he serves one term or two. A renegade president can provoke a lot of crises over the next six years; even the most patient European leaders might find themselves forced to respond more forcefully to ensure their political survival at home. Theresa May and France’s Emmanuel Macron have already discovered that seeking to play the role of “Trump whisperer” comes with a high risk of personal humiliation and domestic political blowback; the course of moderation may be less and less appealing as time passes.

More fundamentally, if Trump wins reelection, the allies will no longer be able to cling to the hope that he is the great aberration; they may conclude that they have no choice but to start preparing for a future in which America turns away from Atlanticism. And looking beyond the challenges posed by Trump himself, some of the deeper ills afflicting the alliance could well outlast the 45th president, or they could cause serious disruptions in NATO from the European side. Betting against NATO would require ignoring a lot of history. Yet assuming it will simply come through this crisis requires ignoring a lot of warning signs.

If a fundamental rupture occurred, or if NATO were simply hollowed out and devalued by escalating internal tensions, the injury to American interests would be grievous. The stupendous achievements of the post-war era—the great-power peace, unprecedented global prosperity, and flourishing of human rights and democracy—have depended on the historically unprecedented cooperation of the transatlantic community. That community would be divided and its accomplishments jeopardized, and Washington would be deprived of the European partner that has buttressed its power and supported its global agenda. More ominous, the solidarity of the democratic world would be rent just as the authoritarian challenges to the global order are intensifying.

European power may not be what it once was, and the major long-term threat to international stability—a rising China—may be located on the other side of the globe. But America and Europe together remain the largest agglomeration of state power in the world, and it is doubtful that the democracies will be able to address the threats posed by the authoritarian Russia or China if they do not face those challenges together. It is hard to envision how NATO will make much progress toward overcoming its current crises so long as Trump is president. If the worst can be avoided until he departs the scene, salvaging the alliance and all it has accomplished may provide a salutary mission for his successor.