**Does Anyone Know Why April 4 Is Important?**

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April 4th is an important date in American history and particularly after World War II. On that date seventy-five years ago, twelve states gathered in Washington to sign a treaty of the same name that created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO is and was a defensive military alliance originally conceived to contain and deter the spread of the Soviet Union further west into Europe.

After Germany was defeated in 1945, spheres of influence were put in place in Europe. As Winston Churchill famously observed in his Truman Library speech in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946, “From Stettin in the Baltic, to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” By 1949, the Soviet Union extended its control over much of Eastern Europe and had established puppet regimes in those states beholden and largely governed by Moscow.

The centerpiece of the Washington Treaty remains Article 5 that states “an attack on one shall be considered an attack on all.” However, the treaty does not guarantee that an attack will automatically lead to a declaration of war. Interestingly, the only time Article 5 was invoked was on September 12th, 2001 following al Qaeda’s destruction of New York City’s Twin Towers. Imagine if NATO’s founding fathers awakened to find NATO at war not at the inner-German border but in faraway Afghanistan outside its treaty defined NATO territory.

What NATO needs is a new strategy oriented around a Porcupine Defense.

When the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, since the raison d’être had disappeared, rather than dissolve the alliance, NATO perceived a global role as a provider of stability and expanded membership. The motto became “Out of Area,” meaning outside the European guidelines, or “out of business.” And, as Russia increasingly became more paranoid about what it perceived as a more aggressive NATO, it occupied Georgia’s South Ossetia in 2008; Crimea in 2014; and invaded Ukraine in February 2022. NATO reacted. With the accession of Finland and Sweden, NATO now has thirty-two members.

Further, NATO’s interests spread to the Pacific to counter China’s growing economic, military and global influence. If for whatever reason, China and the US became engaged in a conflict and China limited military action only to US bases in Asia and Hawaii, because of NATO’s territorial guidelines, Article 5 would not apply unless the Afghan exception were repeated.

Throughout NATO’s history, recurrent calls for reducing US forces in Europe dating back over five decades to Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and the Carter Administration’s pressure on Europe to absorb more burden sharing have persisted. But the only president to call NATO obsolete and threaten not to defend it was Donald Trump. His latest comment that Mr. Putin “can do whatever the hell he wants” was not well received across the alliance.

Some argue that Trump is being clever in forcing NATO to pay its fair share. The current target is two percent of GDP that is not being met by a majority of its members. However, the former president does not seem to recognize that NATO is not Mar-a-Lago where members have to pay dues or contribute to a central fund. And Europe fears that if Trump is re-elected, US commitment to NATO cannot be assured.

A current sticking point is US aid to Ukraine. The Republican members of the House are unable to pass that bill even though of some $60 billion total, virtually all that money will go to US defense manufacturers who build these weapons of war. Still, other members of NATO have not forgotten President John F. Kennedy’s semi-humorous warning: “The only thing worse than being an enemy of the United States was being a friend or ally.”

NATO should regard this moment as an inflection point. First, some European members, especially the two nuclear weapons powers Britain and France, should discreetly consider some contingent options were Trump re-elected. Second, while it will take Russia some years to recover from its huge military losses in Ukraine, the alliance is hampered by the growing expense of weapons and people that are producing a form of structural disarmament. NATO’s forces are shrinking in numbers and capability that can only be reversed by dramatic increases in defense spending that are not politically viable.

What NATO needs is a new strategy oriented around a Porcupine Defense. This defense will make any initial Russian military attack west too costly to contemplate. This can be done as Ukraine’s defense has shown. But to last another 75 years, the status quo will not work. Action is needed now.

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