



*Strategic Studies Group*

# **How To Make NATO Relevant Again**

**Ideas for the Trump Administration**

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***Strategic Studies Group GEES***

Diego de León, 47 Melior E-28006 Madrid Spain

Phone: +34 91 361 0738 Email: [info@gees.org](mailto:info@gees.org)

<http://www.gees.org>

## Introduction

**Burden-sharing has been a constant source of friction within the Atlantic Alliance** given the obvious disparities in the contribution to the collective defense by its members. **President Trump is right in demanding that European allies must increase their defense expenditures and do more for the common good.** But bearing in mind the numerous stratagems used in the past by America's allies not to fulfill their obligations, President Trump should express his demands in specific terms. Furthermore, **the goal of spending 2% of GDP in defense should be qualified in terms of outputs and real capabilities.**

Also, **the strategic environment has changed** dramatically during the last two decades. **If NATO wants to be relevant in the quest of the West's security needs, it must adapt and change as well.** Find a fair and just level of burden-sharing is an appropriate starting point. However, NATO must rethink its core missions and the way to achieve its strategic goals. **Only with a new vision, new procedures, structures and budgets, America and the West will have the NATO that they need.**

## I. Why NATO Should Exist Today

**The Atlantic alliance was established to defend the Western world** against its main threat at the time — the Soviet Union. Nearly seventy years later, NATO should still be the preeminent multilateral military pillar to protect and defend Western civilization against its multifaceted enemies.

Unfortunately, **NATO's existential mission has been somewhat lost since the demise of the Soviet Union.** NATO mistakenly took various activities and operations as its strategic driver, away from its original vision, which moved the organization from collective defense to something akin to a peace enforcement provider. Furthermore, NATO moved from being a firm, collective- response body to becoming a framework for coalitions of the willing and diluting the collective sense that was the crucial purpose of the organization.

It can be said that since 1989, **NATO has become less than the sum of its parts**, with some members much more active and engaged than the entire organization as a whole. In fact, in the last two decades **NATO has basically opted out of the major strategic issue of our time, Islamic terrorism**, and generating mixed results at best in its out-of area operations. Worse yet, it has failed to become more efficient in its traditional mission of keeping peace in Europe.

**It is time for NATO to revive its mission.** The Western World is unfortunately not short of demons: From existential enemies such as Islamic terrorism and jihadism, to revisionist powers such as Russia and China, revolutionary regimes such as the Ayatollahs of Iran, or dangerous dictators such as North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

## II. - Why Should President Trump Should Push For Change?

NATO used to serve American strategic interests well. Unfortunately, the evolution of NATO and the global strategic environment after 1989 made the organization less relevant to U.S. security policies: Europe was stable, and living in peace and freedom. In addition, NATO made only marginal contributions to the challenges America faced after 9/11, either in Iraq or in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Allies dramatically cut defense expenditures and stalled in the modernization of their armed forces.

Not anymore. **President Trump has a historical window of opportunity before him to save NATO from irrelevance:**

- First, **NATO allies did agree during the NATO 2014 summit in Wales on the need to reverse declining defense budgets** and to increase them, having the two percent of GDP target as a long-term goal to achieve. Though slow and insufficient, it is an acknowledgement of moving in the right direction;
- Second, **European citizens are increasingly concerned about Islamic terrorism**, and even if European leaders tend to consider jihadism as a police problem, popular support for military actions against terrorist groups, such as ISIL in Iraq and Syria, has increased significantly;
- Third, **a more aggressive Russia has mobilized NATO members**, in particular Northern and Central European allies. The growing public perception of risks will make it easier for leaders to strengthen national and collective military capabilities;
- Fourth, **everyone in NATO is fully aware of the voluntary disarmament that took place in Europe** over the last twenty years, as well as the unequal burden-sharing regarding collective responsibilities. Members know they have run out of excuses;
- Fifth, **the absence of strong leaders in Europe** with opposing strategic views, e.g. as during the time of General De Gaulle years, may pave the way for clear U.S. leadership for the Alliance.

Current divisions among European allies and the deep political crisis within the European Union inhibit Europeans from making reforms for the common defense. Paradoxically, this weakness is a great opportunity for the United States to inspire a renewal of NATO. Thus, **if President Trump marks a clear path forward, NATO allies will follow**. If the course of action for renewal is based on clear milestones and are realistically assessed over time, the allies will actually present little resistance.

### III. How Should President Trump Lead

President Trump should make clear that America values the alliance, provided that **all allies agree upon, accept, and respect some basic principles** without exception:

- **First, NATO, as the pre-eminent military alliance of the West, must be beneficial to each nation individually and to the West as a civilization.** Everyone has a responsibility towards the collective defense of all, but also each member must also get a clear benefit for its own defense.
- **Second, as a guarantor of Western civilization, NATO must be prepared to deter all powers that seek to limit our freedom, prosperity, and security. It must also be ready to counter actively any threat to our way of life and to eliminate any open adversary or enemy.** Thus, revisionist powers such as Russia should be deterred, not threatened; however, the purveyors and backers of radical Islamic terrorism should be annihilated.
- **Third, NATO must go from just being potentially valuable to becoming decisive when confronting the defining threats of our time.** Indecisive engagements make for indecisive players. Operations should be carefully considered; however, when they become unavoidable and are embarked upon, decisive effects and victory should be the only guiding principles.

- **Fourth, as the military backbone of Western civilization, NATO must be based on an unwavering political commitment among its members.** This political commitment must be expressed in the clear and measurable military obligations of each member.
- **Fifth, NATO must put at the center of its vision and missions the fight against Islamic terrorism.** The West doesn't have the luxury of choosing its enemies or the timing of its rise. No matter how hard the challenge against them may be, **NATO must be front and center confronting this existential struggle.** Confronting Islamic terrorism is much more than law-enforcement actions and intelligence operations, as the many theatres across the globe, now relevant to the threat, clearly demonstrate. It is an asymmetrical battle that encompasses political, educational, ideological, and military means. To be up to the current challenge, **NATO has to be the military expression of the inner force of our Judeo-Christian tradition and civilization.**

## IV. What President Trump Should Ask NATO to Do

1. **Military Burden-Sharing and Solidarity.** In order to make clear the political solidarity among members and towards collective security, NATO members must agree to increase their economic defense effort. Reaching national defense expenditures of two percent of GDP is a basic commitment. Having said that, NATO must be efficient in military terms, so:

- **First, the increase in defense expenditures must be real, not the product of fiscal or budgetary engineering;**
- **Second, the goal of two percent must be reached in the short term, not in a decade;**
- **Third, the increase must be oriented towards the acquisition of new capabilities, not to add personnel or more military headquarters;**
- **Finally, these defense expenditures should be periodically reviewed and assessed in terms of outputs:** For instance, deployability is more important than the number of platforms.

2. **Strategic Burden-Sharing and Solidarity.** In order to strengthen the strategic and military solidarity of members, **NATO must act collectively.** The alliance cannot sit idle just serving as a framework to nurture coalitions of the willing. NATO's real power rests in its ability to project force and in order to do so to achieve it with strategic impact, NATO must be able to count on all its members, not on just some of them. NATO takes decisions by consensus; once a decision is reached, all members must share the responsibility to execute it operationally.

3. **Administrative Burden-Sharing and Solidarity.** As the military arm of the West, NATO must adapt its vision, missions, and structures, to combat effectively Islamic terrorism — the principal threat the West faces today. In order to explain this new strategic orientation, **NATO will convene by the end of this year a special summit, in which Foreign and Defense secretaries/ministers will be joined by Homeland/Interior secretaries, with a mandate to discuss how to integrate their fields of responsibility and capabilities into NATO's.** As it has been dramatically demonstrated in multiple Western capitals, the line between foreign operations and homeland defense has become increasingly blurred given the terrorist strategy of striking in our homelands.

4. **Civilizational Burden-Sharing and Solidarity.** As the defender of Western civilization, NATO cannot limit

its membership to the North- Atlantic region. Other nations are part of our civilization too and have demonstrated over time their willingness to contribute to our prosperity and security. **NATO must invite the prime ministers of Japan, Australia, and Israel to the next summit as observers and discuss how to integrate these countries into the organization as soon as possible.**

## V. The Traps President Trump Must Avoid

Among European leaders, it has become mainstream to think that, given the current realities of the world, President Trump is “moderating” his views on many international issues, including the role and future of NATO. There is further a widespread belief that politicians are elected not to fulfill their promises but to manage situations. This attitude is legitimate when talking about international commitments.

Thus, first, **on defense budgets, President Trump must approach his European NATO allies bearing in mind the following;**

- On many an occasion in the past, the pledges to comply with defense expenditure limits were never fulfilled. **Promises were systematically broken by most European allies without consequences;**
- If forced to choose between expenditures on personnel or modernization of their armies, allied leaders almost **unequivocally prefer to sacrifice systems and capabilities in favor of bloated ranks.**

Second, NATO’s current driver of the NATO alliance is the revival of the threat emanating from Russia. It is linked to the traditional NATO mission. It is what NATO knows how to do and fits its traditional mindset.

Thus, **on Russia, President Trump should reject:**

- **Any unjustified temptation in NATO to reinstate Cold War 2.0 missions, structures, and operations. Provocations should be avoided** as part of the collective-defense position;
- **Any further enlargement in Europe.** In fact, NATO has more members today than it should in terms of cohesiveness, strategy, and common values.

Third, European allies always procrastinate when the use of force is involved. They are very apt at finding all kinds of excuses to express political solidarity while avoiding any military commitment at the same time.

Thus, **on operational solidarity, President Trump should encourage**

- **Any system that may produce standing collective units that could be deployed once a decision is reached at the highest level — the Atlantic Council;**
- **The constitution of an integrated weapons acquisition agency that will manage the defense expenditures of modernization as required by the organization’s planning and goals.**

Fourth, political leaders in Europe tend to resist any change and hide behind the need to protect their armed forces from unnecessary upheavals. In that sense, NATO is a bureaucratic monster where political

decisions lose all impetus, particularly if specific members are not too keen to implement them. In many cases, cornering reluctant allies is often the only way forward.

Thus, **on keeping and fulfilling the decisions adopted collectively, President Trump should**

- **Avoid any conciliatory tone that may encourage European allies not to fulfill their promises.**
- **Threaten with consequences if the goals are not achieved.**

## **Conclusions**

During the Cold War years, NATO proved to be a good instrument to deter and defend the West from its enemies. Unfortunately, it has been less successful when actually fighting its enemies after 1989. In the last two decades, NATO, as a whole, has become more politically divided, strategically fragmented, and militarily weaker. Nonetheless, the enemies of the West have not stopped growing.

**President Trump is right when demanding that European allies should do more. However, he should also demand them to think more** and assume more strategic responsibilities. It is the time to transform NATO in order to make this collective organization relevant for the security needs of today and tomorrow. **Increasing defense budgets is a basic requirement, but it is not enough. NATO also needs America's clear leadership and vision to transform itself. Only in this fashion will America be able to make NATO relevant again.**



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