

Trump, NATO, and Deterrence

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Donald Trump said, “There has never been a president as tough on Russia as I have been.”¹ But the more accepted narrative was summed up by a *CNN* reporter: as Russia ratcheted up tensions with the West for the better part of the last decade, “nearly every step of the way, former President Donald Trump parroted Kremlin talking points, excused Russian aggression and sometimes even embraced it outright. Experts say Trump’s action weakened Ukraine, divided NATO, emboldened [Russian president Vladimir] Putin and helped get us to where we are today.”² Yet if we look at the factual evidence, Trump has a point.

After decades of American withdrawal from Europe and the removal of credible US ground forces, the Trump administration reversed course. Over the four Trump years, through a program called the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), the US increased its military strength in Europe and particularly reestablished a credible US ground (i.e., armored) presence. The administration gave lethal aid—Javelin missiles—

¹ Marshall Cohen, “37 Times Trump Was Soft on Russia,” *CNN Politics*, August 4, 2020, www.cnn.com.

² Marshall Cohen, “4 Things To Remember About Trump, Ukraine and Putin,” *CNN Politics*, March 26, 2022, www.cnn.com.

to Ukraine, which countered the Obama administration's refusal to provide lethal aid.³ Separately from EDI, the Trump administration put in place plans to increase US Army strength in Germany. Trump successfully pressured fellow NATO members to increase their own defense spending, thereby increasing combined capabilities. The administration strengthened and revitalized the alliance and reestablished US leadership. None of this is consistent with the *CNN* narrative above.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, candidate Trump called NATO obsolete and indicated that he wanted to have a good relationship with Putin.⁴ After Trump won the election, a narrative emerged around the suggestion that his campaign had colluded with Moscow on a Russian influence operation to improve his chances of victory. Moreover, it was alleged that Trump's attitude imperiled NATO. The Trump-as-Russian-stooge theme developed so rapidly that a Special Counsel, Robert Mueller, was appointed just months into the new administration to investigate any coordination between the Russian government and the Trump campaign.⁵ The investigation dominated the news cycle for two years and Trump as a Russian

³ See also Richard C. Thornton, "The Ukraine War: Strategic Failure and Leadership Change" in this issue of *Journal of Strategy and Politics*.

⁴ Fabrice Pothier and Alexander Vershbow, "NATO and Trump," *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, May 23, 2017, www.atlanticcouncil.org.

⁵ "Robert Mueller Appointed Special Counsel," *CBS News*, May 17, 2017, www.cbsnews.com.; and Office of the Deputy Attorney General, Order no. 3915-2017, *Appointment of Special Counsel To Investigate Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, and Related Matters*, May 17, 2017, www.justice.gov.

lackey became an article of faith in much of the media.⁶ Ultimately Mueller concluded that there was no collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign.⁷

With regard to NATO, Vice President Mike Pence gave a speech early in the administration strongly supporting the alliance and Trump backed away from the “obsolete” charge, though the mainstream media took little note.⁸ In May 2017 President Trump attended a meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government, where, according to *CNN* coverage, he caused a new crisis by “failing to endorse Article 5” of the North Atlantic Treaty (the article affirming that an attack against one is an attack against all). For days, panels of expert talking heads decried this “failure” by Trump and how much damage it did to America’s European relationships. For example, a reporter writing in *The Atlantic* declared that “Trump’s failure to endorse Article 5 may come to be one of the greatest diplomatic blunders made by an American president since World War II.”⁹

⁶ This continues to the present. For example, see David Moye, “Trump Takes Credit for NATO—and is promptly reminded of a Few Pesky Facts,” *Huffington Post*, February 28, 2022, www.huffpost.com; and Matthew Yglesias, “There’s Actually Lots of Evidence of Trump-Russia Collusion,” *Vox.com*, June 11, 2018.

⁷ Pete Williams, Julia Ainsley, and Gregg Birnbaum, “Mueller Finds No Proof of Trump Collusion with Russia; AG Barr Says Evidence ‘Not Sufficient’ to Prosecute,” *NBC News*, March 24, 2019, www.nbcnews.com.

⁸ Pothier and Vershbow, “NATO and Trump.”

⁹ Thomas Wright, “Trump Remains a NATO Skeptic,” *The Atlantic*, May 27, 2017. See also Robbie Gramer, “Trump Hands Putin a Win at First NATO Meeting,” *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2017; “Highlights: In Brussels Trump Scolds Allies on Cost-Sharing and Stays Vague on Article 5,” *New*

What Trump said during his speech at NATO headquarters was, “If all NATO members had spent just 2 percent of their GDP on defense last year, we would have had another \$119 billion for our collective defense and for the financing of additional NATO reserves.”¹⁰ By stating “we” and “our collective defense” he was including the United States, thereby reassuring allies while simultaneously pressing them to do their part to produce a stronger and more capable alliance.

On June 9, 2017, at a White House press conference with Romanian president Klaus Iohannis, Romanian journalist Ramona Avramescu asked President Trump if he supported Article 5 of the treaty. He answered “Yes, absolutely, I’d be committed to Article 5.”¹¹ CNN aired the statement but did not comment further. There were no talking heads, no deep analyses. The following month, in advance of the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, CNN again trotted out the “Trump didn’t endorse Article 5 when he went to NATO” line. The president repeated his strong belief in Article 5 during his pre-summit visit to Warsaw, pointing out that “the United States has demonstrated, not

York Times, May 25, 2017; and Karen Attiah, “Trump’s Behavior at NATO Is A National Embarrassment,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 2017.

¹⁰ “Watch: President Trump’s Speech at NATO HQ,” *CBS News* via YouTube, May 25, 2017, www.youtube.com; “Donald J. Trump, Remarks at the Dedication Ceremony for the Berlin Wall Memorial and the 9/11 and Article 5 Memorial in Brussels, Belgium,” May 25, 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara, www.presidency.uscb.edu.

¹¹ “Donald J. Trump, The President’s News Conference With President Klaus Iohannis of Romania,” June 9, 2017, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.uscb.edu.

merely with words but with its actions, that we stand behind Article 5, the mutual defense commitment.”¹² CNN’s explanation was that “he finally endorsed” Article 5.

During the media feeding frenzy following the May NATO summit, reporters pressed Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to comment on Trump’s “refusal” to endorse Article 5. In response, Stoltenberg observed that “the US commitment to our security guarantees, to Article 5, to collective defense is not only in words but also in deeds,” pointing out that the Trump administration’s budget proposed a 40 percent increase in funding for US military presence in Europe. He noted Trump’s commitment to Article 5 as well as to fair burden-sharing, and that “after years of decline in defense spending across Europe and Canada . . . in 2016 we had significant increase.”¹³

In referring to US expenditure, the secretary general was talking about EDI. The United States had removed its last armored forces from Europe in 2013. Not surprisingly, Putin began his aggression against Ukraine in 2014. NATO searched for a response and moved naval and air forces around. But something like a large NATO armored training exercise in Poland was not possible because there was no US armor in Europe. Allies would not engage in such a provocative maneuver toward Russia without US participation. The Obama administration responded with a \$1 billion, one-year program to deploy a rotational armored brigade combat team (ABCT) to Europe and titled the

¹² “Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland,” July 6, 2017, www.trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov.

¹³ “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg Following the Meeting of NATO Heads of State and/or Government in Brussels on 25 May [2017],” www.nato.int.

program the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI).¹⁴ However, the Russians did not stop with Crimea and combat continued in eastern Ukraine. Considering this, the administration decided to continue the program and its budget request in 2016 included \$3.4 billion to continue the rotational ABCT in 2017.¹⁵ The assumption was that this money would be spent by a Hillary Clinton administration. When Donald Trump became president instead, the last thing one would have expected would be strengthening of NATO, given the prevailing narrative about his views on Russia and Europe. But Trump renamed the ERI the “European Deterrence Initiative” and his first budget request, referenced in Secretary General Stoltenberg’s comments above, included \$4.8 billion for the program.¹⁶ The proposal provided for a “continuous heel-to-toe presence of an ABCT and deferred previous scheduled force reductions.” The army got the lion’s share of the funding with \$3.2 billion (of the \$4.8 billion), and this included planned repositioning of equipment for two ABCTs.¹⁷

¹⁴ Patrick Dickson, “Hagel’s Budget to Reshape Forces Meets with Strong Opposition,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 24, 2014.

¹⁵ Mark F. Cancian, “The European Reassurance Initiative,” *Critical Questions* (Blog), Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2016, www.csis.org. An ABCT differs from the classic brigade that was part of a division. The division would supply artillery, engineers, combat helicopters and certain logistic support. The ABCT has its own artillery, etc. A brigade in a division normally had 3,200-3,500 troops. An ABCT might have 4,200-4,800.

¹⁶ US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Trump Administration’s March 2017 Defense Budget Proposals: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Pat Towell and Lynn M. Williams, R44806 (2017).

¹⁷ Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller), *European Reassurance Initiative, Department of Defense Budget, Fiscal Year (FY)*

Prepositioning replicates a technique for rapid reinforcement used during the Cold War. The equipment is the same as that used by units in the United States. A support unit maintains the equipment and when needed, issues the equipment to troops flown in from the United States.¹⁸

The Trump administration's FY 2019 budget request for EDI was \$6.3 billion.¹⁹ The request included an additional \$250 million for aid to Ukraine that included Javelin missiles.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the Russians were concerned and expressed objections.²¹ In September 2018 the US announced it would send more permanently stationed troops to Germany. The plan included placement of a Field Artillery brigade headquarters and two Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) battalions in Grafenwöhr, Germany and a Short-Range Air Defense (SHORAD) battalion in Ansbach with support units going to Hohenfels and

2018 (Washington: US Department of Defense, May 2017), comptroller.defense.gov.

¹⁸ Cameron Porter, "405th Army Field Support Brigade LOGCAP Provides Vital Service to US Forces Deployed Across Europe," US Army News and Information, Defense Media Activity, March 12, 2022, www.army.mil.

¹⁹ US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview*, by Pat Towell and Aras D. Kazlauskas, IF 10946 (2018).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, and Josh Lederman, "US Steps Up Lethal Aid to Ukraine with Plans to Provide 210 Anti-tank Missiles," *Times of Israel*, March 2, 2018, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).

²¹ "Russia to 'Draw Conclusions' from US Lethal Aid to Ukraine—Lavrov," *Ukrayins'ke Nezalezhne Informatsiyne Ahentstvo Novyn (Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News)*, February 11, 2018, www.unian.info.

Baumholder by September 2020.²² The funding for this was separate from EDI and would not detract from the program.²³

During 2018 the administration began to signal it was considering changing the rotational ABCT to permanently stationed. This was an important political signal, as permanent stationing implies a stronger commitment. Part of the justification was that permanent stationing would be less expensive over the longer term than continuing rotation. The fact that the “long term” was important to the United States is a notable message in and of itself.²⁴ The conference report of the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act includes a reporting requirement on the feasibility and advisability of permanent stationing of US forces in Poland.²⁵ In May 2018 the government of Poland offered \$2 billion for infrastructure to support permanent stationing of American forces there. The US ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, stated in a press conference that the offer was under consideration and that it was a strong proposal.²⁶ These signals were striking, given a

²² “US to Send 1,500 More Soldiers to Germany by late 2020,” *Reuters*, September 7, 2018, www.reuters.com. (Covid would delay the actual deployments).

²³ Jen Judson, “Funding to Deter Russia Reaches \$6.5 Billion in FY 2019 Defense Budget Request,” *Defense News*, February 12, 2018, www.defensenews.com.

²⁴ Towell and Kazlauskas, *European Deterrence Initiative*; John R. Deni, *Rotational Deployments vs. Forward Stationing: How Can the Army Achieve Assurance and Deterrence Efficiently and Effectively?* (US Army War College Press, 2017), www.press.armywarcollege.edu.

²⁵ Towell and Kazlauskas, *European Deterrence Initiative*.

²⁶ “October 2, 2018: Press Briefing by Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison,” US Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

continuing controversy stemming from the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. As part of that document NATO gave assurances that it would not permanently station “substantial” combat forces outside the 1997 boundaries of the alliance “in the foreseeable security environment.”²⁷ Russia was greatly concerned by this issue and consistently pressed the alliance to define “substantial.”²⁸ The Russians were acutely aware of the discussions on permanent stationing of US forces in Poland and warned against it.²⁹ Ultimately the United States permanently stationed a division headquarters in Poland. While this could provide command and control for rotational and prepositioned ABCTs, the headquarters itself could not be considered “substantial” combat forces.

During my time as the head of arms control coordination on NATO’s International Staff, I argued that the “substantial” combat forces assurances of the Founding Act should be abandoned, but my arguments did not gain traction. The Trump administration’s floating of the notion of permanent stationing of combat forces in Poland was a step in the right direction. After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, three people who crafted the Founding Act assurances penned an op-ed arguing that it was time to suspend the Founding Act.³⁰ However, the Biden

²⁷ *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation*, signed in Paris, France, 27 May 1997, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, online at www.nato.int.

²⁸ The author was the head of arms control coordination on NATO’s International Staff and dealt with the Russians on this issue.

²⁹ “Russian Deputy FM: US Base in Poland Will Dismantle NATO-Russia Founding Act” *Sputnik*, September 26, 2018.

³⁰ Daniel Fried, Steven Pifer and Alexander Vershbow, “NATO-Russia: It’s Time to Suspend the Founding Act,” *The Hill*, June 7, 2022, www.thehill.com.

administration, in the middle of this war, continues to enforce the assurances. At the June 2022 NATO Summit the United States announced military enhancements in Europe. The Trump administration had stood up the V Corps headquarters at Fort Knox, Kentucky and deployed a forward command post of this headquarters to Poland. The announcement of enhancements included making this forward command post a permanently stationed unit in Poland.³¹ At a White House press briefing a reporter asked if this meant the end of the Founding Act. Assistant Secretary of Defense Celest Wallander answered that the stationing of the forward command post was “consistent with the commitment and our understanding of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.”³²

The Trump administration’s EDI budget requests for fiscal years 2020 and 2021 were \$5.9 billion and \$4.7 billion, respectively. The current SACEUR, General Christopher Cavoli, in his May 26, 2022 confirmation hearing stressed the importance of EDI, calling it “absolutely vital.”³³ As a result of the EDI the United States put a continuous rotational ABCT in Poland and established a prepositioned ABCT along with a permanently stationed division headquarters. In early 2020 NATO launched the largest reinforcement exercise since the Cold War. The prepositioned ABCT was activated. Two armored divisions deployed from the United States by ship. With the V Corps

³¹ US Department of Defense, Fact Sheet—US Defense Contributions to Europe, June 29, 2022, www.defense.gov.

³² On-the-Record Press Call by NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby and Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander, The White House, June 29, 2022.

³³ US Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Nomination—Cavoli, Full Committee Hearing*, May 26, 2022.

forward headquarters that would mean an American heavy corps exercising in Europe. There was significant allied participation. British armor crossed the channel. Covid unfortunately shut down the exercise.³⁴

In the current crisis, in addition to providing aid to Ukraine, NATO has increased its strength to deter Russian attacks against alliance members. Unlike 2014, the United States has been able to play a significant role in this effort. The widely publicized deployment of the ready brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division conceals a much larger contribution made possible by years of planning and funding in EDI. Before the end of March 2022 at almost no additional cost, the United States had an armored division in Europe along with a command architecture that could command and control a much larger force.

As the crisis developed, the V Corps moved the bulk of its headquarters to Europe. The rotational ABCT in Poland was stopped from rotating back to the States and the already planned deployment of the replacement ABCT went ahead. Soldiers from an ABCT from the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Georgia, were flown to Europe and issued equipment by the 405th Field Support Brigade. The exercise budget of EDI covers such efforts. Before the end of March, then, at truly little additional cost, there were three American ABCTs in Europe. Looking at it another way, there is an American armored division in Europe. There is also a

³⁴ F. Charles Parker IV, "Biden, Trump, NATO and Ukraine," *American Thinker*, December 23, 2021, www.americanthinker.com.

command architecture that could command and control a corps.³⁵

The Biden administration chose not to use these capabilities during the Russian buildup so as not to “provoke” Moscow but was able to quickly enjoy the deterrent effect in defense of NATO territory of an American armored division in Europe. These capabilities were built up deliberately and intelligently over the four Trump years. What we did after the crisis began could have been done earlier to affect Putin’s risk/reward calculation. We could also have reactivated parts of the exercise shut down because of Covid. But we did nothing. The “let’s not provoke the Russians” attitude was highlighted late in 2021 when the Biden administration froze military aid to Ukraine to give time for diplomacy to defuse the situation.³⁶

Part of the criticism of Trump was that he harangued allies about their defense spending. Indeed, as already noted, he dedicated part of his speech at his first NATO summit to this theme. But Trump did not make up the two percent of GDP defense spending target. That had been a US position for years.³⁷

³⁵ John Vandiver, “US Poised to Have Three Armored Brigades in Europe at Once as Troop Numbers Climb,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 22, 2022; Cameron Porter, “US Army Activates Prepositioned Stocks in Europe,” *aerotechnews.com*, March 4, 2022.

³⁶ Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “Despite Appeals from Ukraine, Biden Holds Back Additional Military Aid to Kyiv Amid Diplomatic Push,” NBC News, December 10, 2021, www.nbcnews.com; Betsy Woodruff Swan and Paul McLeag, “White House Freezes Ukraine Military Package That Includes Lethal Weapons,” *Politico*, June 18, 2021, www.politico.com.

³⁷ See, for example, “Ambassador Victoria Nuland, US Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Trump escalated the pressure. Though many nations still lag, allied defense spending did increase (before the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and there was progress toward meeting the target. Secretary General Stoltenberg has pointed this out many times.³⁸ In late 2018 he announced that European allies and Canada expected to spend an additional \$266 billion on defense (over their plans from the previous year) between 2018 and 2024.³⁹

To sum up, the Trump administration strengthened the NATO alliance and reestablished US leadership through real commitment. NATO members are spending more on defense, which also strengthens the alliance. None of this could please Putin. It is likely that the disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan prompted Putin to see if President Biden would use the capabilities put in place by the previous administration. I do not know if the deterrence actions suggested above would have changed Putin's plans. But putting an American armored division in Europe as part of a large NATO exercise could have affected his risk/reward calculation. Doing nothing also affected his calculation, but not in a helpful way. The fact that such an option

Remarks at the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels, Belgium, October 30, 2006," [US Department of State Archive](#); and "Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defense Agenda, Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011," available at www.c-span.org.

³⁸ "Stoltenberg Confirms Commitment to Spending 2% of GDP on Defense," *Reuters*, July 12, 2018; Marc Selinger, "NATO Allies 'Stepping Up' on Defense Spending, Stoltenberg Says," *janes.com*, June 16, 2021.

³⁹ "Keynote Address by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at NATO Industry Forum in Berlin, 13 November 2018," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, www.nato.int.

was possible was due directly to the sustained efforts of EDI. The mainstream media's narrative was wrong.

None of the sources in this piece are secret. The facts of EDI are facts. While I would not expect *CNN* or *MSNBC* to take note, I do wonder why *Fox News*, *Newsmax* or the *Daily Wire* have not noticed. Perhaps they do not think strengthening NATO and the US commitment to it are positive. Trump has pointed to his success at pressing allies to increase defense spending and initiating lethal aid to Ukraine, but otherwise there seems to be general silence on these achievements of the Trump administration. Where are the voices of Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, Mark Levin, Dan Bongino, Brian Kilmeade, Peter Hegseth, Ben Shapiro, and others? If Trump were a Russian stooge, would there have been a European Deterrence Initiative? The obvious answer is "no." Why is no one willing to point this out?