



The Problems Plaguing NATO

December 11, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

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When world leaders gathered in London last week to celebrate NATO's 70th anniversary, they put an international spotlight on a partnership that is profoundly ailing. Seventy years after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty and the formation of the Atlantic Alliance, the West's most powerful and enduring military bloc is suffering from deep systemic dysfunctions.

That all is not well in the Alliance was clear from the wrangling between President Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, who traded recriminations ahead of the summit and pointed barbs at press-conference time. But the problems run far deeper than simple personal politics, and stem from at least two sources.

Today, perhaps NATO's most pressing challenge is the lack of a clearly-defined mission. The alliance was formed following World War II in order, as its first Secretary-General, Lord Ismay, put it, to "*keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.*" In the decades that followed, that formula helped transform Germany into a crucial ally and successfully deter Soviet aggression. But it more or less fell by the wayside with the collapse of the USSR, replaced by the broad objective of establishing — and then broadening — a zone of peace and stability across the European Continent, and eventually beyond.

Today, NATO is once again focused on Russia, which in recent years has demonstrated that it is eager to subvert the post-World War II democratic order in Europe. Since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent annexation of Crimea, the alliance has significantly stepped up its military deployments around — and assistance to — Eastern Europe and the Baltic States as a means of deterring further military adventurism by Moscow. Yet, politically, the modern-day alliance isn't necessarily united regarding the importance of that mission, or even what might be needed to accomplish it.

Back in 2017, a simulated wargame carried out by the prestigious RAND Corporation think tank found NATO woefully unprepared to effectively counter a Russian land offensive against the Baltics — and warned that its defenses would collapse within 36 to 60 hours of a Russian invasion. Some two-and-a-half years on, little has changed. Earlier this fall, outgoing Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford told *Newsweek* that "the NATO advantage over a resurgent Russia has eroded," and that the alliance was losing its edge in strategic competition with an increasingly technologically advanced, militarily capable and politically aggressive Kremlin.

NATO leaders, meanwhile, don't appear uniformly committed to fixing the problem. Just weeks before the London gathering, President Macron made global headlines when he argued forcefully in an interview with *The Economist* that Europe needed to rethink its approach to Russia — despite the fact that the Kremlin hasn't done much to warrant the lifting of sanctions that had been leveled by the EU back in 2014 in response to its invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, President Trump's calls for greater military contributions from member states as a way of shoring up the alliance's strategic capabilities have been met with much political resistance and, at least so far, too little substantive movement. As of mid-2019, according to official NATO estimates, the median defense expenditures among the alliance's 28 member states was a paltry 1.63 percent of national GDP, and just eight countries — the U.S., Greece, Estonia, the U.K., Romania, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania — were spending more than the recommended 2 percent of GDP annually on defense.

The difficulties don't end there, however. NATO also suffers from serious internal friction.

Alliances, they say, limp along at the pace of their most grudging member, and today NATO's most recalcitrant participant is unquestionably Turkey. Over the past decade and a half, the country that once served as the bloc's southeastern flank and its geopolitical outpost in the Middle East has become a less-than-reliable strategic ally.

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party, Turkey has trended in a distinctly anti-Western direction. Although officials in Ankara still pay lip service to their country's longstanding goal of joining Europe, the actions taken by Erdogan's government in recent years — from the acquisition of advanced Russian air defenses against NATO's urging to its permissive attitude toward regional extremists — have given decidedly different indications.

Indeed, just a week before the NATO summit in London, Turkey effectively held the alliance hostage when it refused to endorse a plan to bolster defense of the Baltics unless it got more backing from Europe for its recent invasion and occupation of Syria. It subsequently moderated its stance as a result of international pressure. In the process, though, it injected still more doubt into the notion that it remains a committed member of the NATO coalition.

All of this matters a great deal for the future of the alliance. NATO's London summit closed with a communique that painted a decidedly rosy picture of the organization's health, and spent precious little time discussing the real systemic problems now facing the world's most important military bloc. That's a real shame, because until NATO can clearly, unequivocally begin to address its own shortcomings, the state of its union cannot truly be strong.

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