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NATO SERIES

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Jane's Defence Weekly reported recently that in the seven days ending on June 20, NATO jets scrambled 32 times in Estonia and Lithuania to identify and escort incoming Russian warplanes over the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland. This kind of activity, not seen since the Cold War, is becoming almost routine, not only on NATO's northeastern flank but at sea and in the air over the Black Sea, the North Atlantic, the North Pacific and even the Canadian Arctic. It fits a pattern of the mixture of military, cyber- and informational warfare Russia has waged, mostly unilaterally, since the 2014 invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and before.

The clear military and political success of Russia's surprise military intervention in Syria, against a background of U.S. and western lethargy, has reinforced the notion in the Kremlin, but also further afield, that the U.S. and its allies don't have the backbone to stand up to Russian interventions in areas where President Vladimir Putin and his entourage see a clear strategic interest.

For almost 70 years, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty has been the bedrock of transatlantic security. But in the event of an attack, Article 5 does not commit members to automatically support each other with military action. Article 5 states that a member state "...will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by ... such action as it deems necessary, including [but not necessarily!] the use of armed force..." The United States inserted this caveat into the treaty in 1949. So, military action by the U.S., or any other NATO member, to protect its allies in the event of an attack is not unconditional. It is left to each member's discretion.

During the Cold War, it was taken for granted that Soviet armed aggression would be met by the combined armed force of all the allies, including the U.S. The certainty of a U.S. military reaction was guaranteed by 300,000 American troops permanently stationed in Europe who stood in the way of any Soviet attack. Today, that number is down to about 35,000.

To add to today's imbalance, most western armed forces have remained focused on counter-insurgency and asymmetric warfare of the kind NATO faced in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Russians have been rapidly building up their forces for high intensity combat of the kind we witnessed in eastern Ukraine. The Russian buildup goes on, with an emphasis on surprise, electronic warfare, cyber-operations, speed of action and overwhelming firepower backed by the threat of nuclear escalation. Most NATO countries, including Canada, have been tepid in their reaction. Canada's recently announced defence policy, though a small step forward, provides for relatively tiny contingency forces modelled on the operational requirements of Afghanistan and certainly not on facing a heavy combat scenario in Europe.

U.S. President Donald Trump recently announced a \$54 billion increase in defence spending, about three times the entire Canadian defence budget, and almost double the amount Canada says it will spend annually in 10 years' time. With Canada and many European NATO allies showing almost no inclination to reach even the modest NATO defence spending target of two per cent of



GDP, it's not surprising that voices inside and outside the U.S. administration are calling into question the European commitment to NATO solidarity. The ruckus around Trump's failure to publicly commit to Article 5, even with its caveat, sounds disingenuous, especially from those countries, including Canada, who show no willingness themselves to face up to the growing threat.

Of course, the new U.S. president's unpredictable behaviour, and strong disagreements on climate change and trade, have also soured the atmosphere. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's remarks, in the midst of an election campaign, on the U.S.'s growing unreliability and the need for Europe to stand on its own have deepened the divide. Quite how Europe would be able to defend itself without U.S. military power remains a moot question.

It's worth remembering that Trump is not the first U.S. president to complain about a lack of commitment to burden sharing within NATO. In his address to Canada's Parliament just last year, then-president Barack Obama made the same complaint, albeit in more diplomatic language. In fact, burden sharing has been a constant irritant in transatlantic relations almost since the birth of the Alliance.

What is different today? Not much and a lot. We have entered a new kind of Cold War, this time with an array of dangerous adversaries, from an aggressive, resurgent Russia and a rising, assertive China to relatively weak but dangerous rogue states like Iran and North Korea. A stubborn reluctance of America's NATO allies, including Canada, to step up their commitment to our common defence and security coupled with a growing isolationist tendency among many Americans, including at the highest levels, could put the once robust Atlantic bridge in some peril. Symbolic deployments of small numbers of troops send a political signal to Moscow but they do little to strengthen real NATO military capability on the ground. And they will not appease the growing ranks of America-Firsters in Washington.

The only way to rebuild trust and to renew transatlantic relations is for Canada and its European partners to demonstrate that we are ready to seriously contribute to our common defence. For Canada, a strong bipartisan agreement to commit to an early achievement of the NATO two per cent goal would be a good first step. If our European partners follow our lead, it would send a strong signal of reassurance to our American friends that, if necessary, we are ready to fight alongside them to preserve our freedom and our way of life. This kind of action would go a long way toward revamping the battered transatlantic partnership.

▶ **About the Author**

Richard Cohen is president of RSC Strategic Connections and served in the Canadian and British Armies. He was Professor of European Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies and from 2007-2011, Senior Defence Advisor to the Minister of National Defence.

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