



## Trump's two summits: Can NATO navigate the dangers?

by Ian Bond  
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**Donald Trump attacked his allies at the G7 summit, then embraced North Korea's Kim. Will summits with NATO and Vladimir Putin follow the same pattern?**

NATO leaders are worried about what US President Donald Trump may say at the NATO summit in Brussels this month, and what he might agree to in his first proper summit meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin a few days later (the two have so far only held a short bilateral meeting, in the margins of the G20 Hamburg summit in July 2017). A bad tempered NATO summit followed by an ill-considered rapprochement with Russia would further divide the West.

Trump's behaviour around the G7 summit in Canada on June 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> has already damaged relations with the US's closest partners. On May 31<sup>st</sup> he imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from Canada and the EU on the grounds of national security. On the eve of the summit, Trump [called](#) for Russia to be re-admitted to the G7. It was expelled from the then G8 after it annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014.

After [reportedly](#) insulting behaviour aimed at German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trump left the meeting early. He then withdrew his agreement to the summit declaration while en route to his Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, threatened more trade measures against his partners and [described](#) his G7 host, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as "weak and dishonest".

By contrast, after the Singapore meeting, Trump described Kim as "talented", and "very smart, very good negotiator, wants to do the right thing" and told Fox News that he and Kim had "good chemistry". Going into talks, the US position was that North Korea must agree to "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation", but the statement issued by Trump and Kim contained no mention of verification or irreversible steps. Essentially, Trump accepted the same expressions of good intent from Kim that he had derided previous US presidents for accepting. In return, without consulting either the Pentagon or his South Korean allies, he announced that the US would cancel military exercises with South Korea. Trump complained that they were "tremendously expensive", "provocative" and "inappropriate".

Now Trump moves on to the NATO summit in Brussels on July 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, and (after a few days in the UK), his bilateral with Putin in Helsinki on July 16<sup>th</sup>. At the G7, Trump [told](#) his partners that NATO was “much too costly for the US”. He has since written to NATO leaders urging greater defence spending, and warning that it will “become increasingly difficult to justify to American citizens why some countries continue to fail to meet our shared collective security commitments”. In a speech to his supporters in South Carolina on June 25<sup>th</sup>, he claimed “We’re spending 90 per cent of NATO [the US share of [NATO defence spending](#) is actually around two-thirds] ... it helps them a lot more than it helps us, we’re very far away”. Though US defence investment in Europe has increased significantly under Trump, his rhetoric suggests that he would rather it had not. In recent weeks he has also attacked the EU (“set up to take advantage of the United States” and “possibly as bad as China, just smaller”) and the German government (tweeting that “the people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition”).

Trump’s decision to hold a summit with Putin almost immediately after the NATO summit will add to the anxiety of other NATO leaders. It is very rare for Trump to criticise Putin, even though the rest of his administration takes a tougher line (US sanctions against Russia have been strengthened significantly in the last year). Indeed, despite the conclusion of the US intelligence community that Putin interfered in the 2016 presidential election, Trump seems to take at face value Putin’s denials, tweeting on June 28<sup>th</sup> “Russia continue to say they had nothing to do with Meddling in our Election!”

If Trump confines himself to intemperate tweeting and private outbursts on burden-sharing at the NATO summit, the damage to the alliance may be limited. But in security as in trade, Trump may decide that he prefers deals to rules, and that rather than trying to work within the constraints of the alliance, he will work bilaterally with those allies who are closer to him politically.

He could, for example, go along with the Polish defence ministry’s proposal for a permanent US military base in Poland, for which Poland would be prepared to pay \$2 billion. Other allies have indicated privately that while they would like to see more US troops in Europe, they are concerned that the Polish proposal envisages a bilateral arrangement between Warsaw and Washington, outside NATO structures. The former commander of the US Army in Europe, General Ben Hodges, has [warned](#) publicly that the proposal could create additional friction in the alliance, and should not be pursued. The *Washington Post* has [reported](#) that at Trump’s suggestion the Pentagon is studying options for a large-scale withdrawal of US troops stationed in Germany – though it is unclear whether this is with a view to moving them to Poland, or out of Europe altogether.

More radically, Trump could revive an idea he hinted at in a *New York Times* [interview](#) in July 2016, when he responded to a question about whether the US would come to the aid of the Baltic States if they were attacked: “Have they fulfilled their obligations to us? If they fulfil their obligations to us, the answer is yes.” In other words, he could re-interpret NATO’s defence guarantee, which talks of each ally assisting allies under attack by taking “such action as it deems necessary”: the US would deem no action necessary if an ally were spending an inadequate amount on defence. Such an approach would strain NATO’s mutual obligations to breaking point.

When it comes to the summit with Putin, Trump showed in Singapore that his highest priority is to be able to announce a success. The details are less important than reaching agreement where his predecessors failed to – even if that means accepting a disadvantageous deal. Putin will have taken careful note of this psychological vulnerability.

In justifying a much-criticised telephone call to Putin to congratulate him on his re-election in March 2018, Trump tweeted that Russia “can help solve problems with North Korea, Syria, Ukraine, ISIS, Iran and even the coming Arms Race”. Suggesting that only he was capable of getting Putin to help in this way, he added: “Bush tried to get along, but didn’t have the “smarts.” Obama and Clinton tried, but didn’t have the energy or chemistry”.

Trump has in effect given Putin a menu to choose from. In Syria, the agreement that Trump and Putin reached at the Hamburg G20 Summit in July 2017 to create a ‘de-escalation zone’ in south-west Syria, in which Syrian and Russian forces would not attack US-supported rebels, has broken down; Putin could offer his best endeavours to restrain Bashar al-Assad (with no intention of doing anything to stop Assad’s continuing atrocities). In Ukraine, Putin could say that he would back renewed efforts to deploy UN peacekeepers between Ukrainian forces and ‘separatists’ (a mixture of Russian regular troops and their local proxies). Or he could offer renewed talks on nuclear arms control.

Such ‘concessions’ from Putin would not be cost free. Some of them, especially the Russian concept for deploying peacekeepers in Eastern Ukraine, are in themselves more beneficial to Russia than to the West. Putin might suggest that in return for progress in resolving the conflict in Eastern Ukraine the US should accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea. He knows that Trump would be receptive: Trump [reportedly](#) told G7 leaders “Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian”. Or Putin might suggest that the US pull out of NATO exercises in Norway this autumn: Exercise Trident Juncture is one of the largest NATO exercises since the end of the Cold War, involving more than 35,000 troops from 30 NATO members and partners, along with 70 ships and about 130 aircraft. There will be a significant US contribution, practising the reinforcement of Europe – a vital task which has hardly been rehearsed in the last 25 years. Trump might well be susceptible to the argument that not only are these exercises a threat to Russia’s security (as Putin perceives it), but that they are also costing the US a lot of money. Or Putin could offer to address NATO worries about Russian tactical nuclear weapons near NATO borders, in return for the US withdrawing its remaining nuclear bombs from Western Europe – thereby decoupling Europe from the US nuclear deterrent.

What can NATO do to mitigate these risks? In part, it is a matter of giving a higher profile to what it is already doing, and allowing Trump to believe that he has successfully turned NATO round – that, as he himself said when he met NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (with whom he apparently gets on well) in April 2017, “it’s no longer obsolete”. Trump used to complain that NATO was not doing enough to fight terrorism; now it is involved in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Summit participants can point to the fact that more of them are meeting the target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence, or are on course to meet by the deadline of 2024. They can trumpet the fact that NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland and the Baltic States is in place. They can point to the decisions the summit will take on increasing readiness, so as to have 30 mechanised battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat ships ready to use within 30 days.

It is unlikely, however, that any of these positive steps will be enough to placate Trump if he wants a fight with America’s allies. NATO nations may have to start planning on the basis that while he is in office the US may not automatically respond to a threat to European security. If that drives Europeans, and especially Germany, to spend more on defence, whether to please Trump or because they feel they cannot rely on him, that would be a good thing.

The 22 (soon to be 21) countries that are members of both the EU and NATO should work even harder on ensuring complementarity and co-ordination between the two organisations, building on the 74 agreed actions to implement the joint EU-NATO declaration issued in 2016. The European Commission and the EEAS have put forward an action plan on military mobility to improve both the infrastructure and the procedures that enable military forces to move around Europe to exercise, or to deploy in a crisis. With or without US reinforcements, countries in Central Europe and the Baltic region would find it harder to defend themselves against a Russian attack if their allies had to reach them via narrow roads, weak bridges and inadequate ports and railways.

Ultimately, if they can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their defence spending and their forces, the non-US members of NATO, with a combined defence budget of \$300 billion and 1.86 million personnel in their armed forces, should be able to deter and defend themselves against Russia, with a defence budget of \$61 billion and 1.01 million personnel. But if they cannot get their act together, then as a senior Western official said privately this week, they will just have to pray that the NATO summit does not go up in smoke.

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