

A Troubled Family: NATO Turns 70

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Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#)

Global Research, December 08, 2019

*Summit anniversaries are not usually this abysmally interesting. While those paying visits to Watford, England on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation** are supposedly signatories to the same agreement, a casual glance would have suggested otherwise. This was a show of some bickering.*

France, never the most comfortable member, suggested that NATO was “experiencing... brain death”. While [this observation](#) by French **President Emmanuel Macron** last month would have carried little weight in another age, it struck a chord, not least because it signalled a role reversal of sorts. The US, he warned, was retreating in its international role. A vacuum had been created, and it was desperately in need of filling. Such language, and affront, is usually the preserve of the current US president, Donald Trump. In 2018, he suggested that the organisation was nothing less than “obsolete”, a relic. Now it was left to France to assume the role of chief heckler.

NATO has been a body in search of a role for some time. In the triumphant aftermath of the Cold War, it became the most visible reminder of US power and overstretch, a blunt instrument of deployment in such theatres as Afghanistan. But the traditional sense that it remains a grouping marshalled against Russia and now, an emerging China, was not something Macron was having much truck with. Beijing should not “be the object of our collective defence... in strictly military terms”.

In company with NATO **Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg**, Macron [told](#) assembled members of the press that identifying enemies was not within the purview of the alliance. “Is our enemy today Russia? Or China? Is it the goal of NATO to designate them enemies? I don’t believe so.” The more standard, if stale problem, was that of “terrorism, which has hit each of our countries.”

This has been seen as a form of ratting. Trump, during the course of a 52-minute meeting on Tuesday morning with Stoltenberg, found the remarks “very insulting” and a “very, very nasty statement essentially to 28 countries.” He instead [pushed](#) for drumming up the China threat. Be careful, warned the US president, about the technology giant Huawei. “I spoke to Italy and they look like they are not going to go forward with [Huawei].” But just to make matters interesting, Britain has refused to play along, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson [not wanting](#) Britain “to be unnecessarily hostile to investment from overseas”.

Another NATO member was also proving problematic, having not played by the rules of the club. Turkey is only a half-hearted subscriber to the Russian demonology, preferring to ink agreements for the purchase of such Moscow sponsored hardware as the anti-aircraft missile system, the S-400. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was keen to leave his mark at this anniversary meeting, threatening a veto of NATO’s efforts to boost defences within the

Baltic States and Poland should members not designate Kurdish fighters in Syria terrorists.

For Macron, Turkey's stance was a sore in the relationship, a point assisted by Trump's withdrawal of troops from northern Syria. The gesture was sufficient to encourage the movement of Turkish units into territory once won by Kurdish-led forces in their fight against the zealots of Islamic State. "When I look at Turkey, they are fighting against those who fight with us," lamented Macron. "Who is the enemy today?" Regarding the issue of designating Kurdish fighters terrorists, there could be no "possible consensus".

Trump was less troubled. "The border and the safe zone is working out very well... and I gave a lot of credit to Turkey for that. The ceasefire is holding very much so, and I think people are surprised, and maybe some day they'll give me credit, but probably not."

The US president kept to his usual 2 percent formula, namely, that member states needed to spend the equivalent of two percent of gross domestic product on defence to pass muster. Germany remains stubbornly low in expenditure, though Canada has promised a spike. But sandpit politics was just around the corner, and Canada's Justin Trudeau proved the target of Trump's barbs at a news conference alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel. "I find him to be a very nice guy but you know the truth is that I called him out over the fact that he's not paying 2 percent and I can see he's not very happy about it."

The comments were sparked by a recorded conversation between Trudeau, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Macron, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Queen Elizabeth's daughter Anne. Not that there was much to go by. Some of the dignitaries had been running late. Johnson duly inquired. "It was like a 40-minute press conference," answered the Canadian leader. "Yeah, yeah, yeah! Forty minutes." Inaudible chatter followed. "I just watched his team's jaws drop to the floor," come Trudeau's words. And so did the prime minister earned the ire of Freedom's Land's commander-in-chief. "He's two-faced," stated Trump, almost pouting in indignation.

Stoltenberg was left to do the secretarial work and hammer out a position of sorts. He suggested that China offered "both opportunities but also challenges." Being vague was the order of the day, and when asked about the squabbles, assumed the role of stern diplomat.

The Economist [was troubled](#) enough to suggest that there were reasons to celebrate. In Trump's company, Stoltenberg [called](#) NATO "the most successful alliance in history because we have been able to change when the world is changing." This was Macron's point, though not necessarily one that has found a soft landing. In Beijing and Moscow, it has probably caused pause for amusement.

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