

The Rise of Populism and the Future of NATO

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ABSTRACT: The rise of populism in the last five years in both the United States and Europe has led some to question the power of NATO. Even though populism has a long and varied history in America and Europe, the common theme has withstood the test of time: people were sick of the so-called ruling elite and demanded change; a head of state and government that will speak for the common people. This paper sees NATO in its current form inimical to the rising era of populism. In order for NATO to survive, it must re-invent itself by combating the problems that have brought on the rise of populism; by retrenching back to its borders and by engaging Russia. If NATO is able to re-invent itself again, it will continue to play a key role in international peace and security.

Keywords: Populism, NATO, Foreign Policy, European Security, Retrenching, Russia.

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Introduction

Populism in Europe has surged since the early 2000s. According to some scholars, populism was widespread in Europe. At that time, entrepreneurs like Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Simeon II in Bulgaria took advantage of large reserves of cash and innovative marketing schemes.¹ At that time, no one speculated that the rise of populism would call the basic tenets of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to question.

The rise of populism in the last five years in both the United States and Europe has led some to question the power of NATO. During his campaign, President Trump stated, “We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down.”² Since he has made that statement, Trump has also called NATO irrelevant and called on US’s Asian allies to pay more for US support. In the short period he has been president, Trump has scrapped the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), criticized NATO, NAFTA, the WTO, and most bilateral relationships the US has fostered since the end of World War II. In Europe, Marine Le Pen, former French presidential candidate associated with the National Front, has praised

1 Erik Jones, “Populism in Europe,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27 (Winter-Spring 2007): 38-9.

2 Michael Hirsch, “Why George Washington would have Agreed with Donald Trump,” *Politico*, May 5, 2016, accessed May 7, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/founding-fathers-2016-donald-trump-america-first-foreign-policy-isolationist-213873>.

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Trump for calling NATO ‘obsolete’ and criticized him for his subsequent backtracking on that statement.³ Similar to Trump being skeptical to international organizations, Geert Wilders, former presidential candidate in the Netherlands wanted to “liberate” the Netherlands and pull the country out of the EU and NATO.⁴ This essay is meant to further the discussion of what the rise of populism might mean for NATO. Suggestions are given that can help secure the purpose of NATO in what has been called the “Age of Populism.”

The Rise of Populism

The rise of populism in the United States and Europe is so pronounced that *Foreign Affairs* decided to dedicate almost the entire November/December 2016 publication to the subject. *Foreign Affairs*’ next two issues stay on the general theme of populism and what it means for the future of the liberal order. The amount of attention this rise of populism is getting should not make us think this is something new. Both Europe and the United States have a long history of populist movements.

Populism in Europe goes back to Roman times when the Roman senators had “populist agendas.” Populism again flared up with peasants’ revolts during and after the Reformation. The French Revolution at the end of the 18th century could be considered a populist revolt. In America, it can be debated whether the Declaration of Independence and subsequent Revolutionary War could be considered populist uprisings. Populism was a force in national politics twice in the 19th century in the US. In his first inaugural address, Andrew Jackson dedicated a single sentence to foreign policy: “With foreign nations,” Jackson declared, “it will be my study to preserve peace and to cultivate friendship on fair and honorable terms, and in adjustment of any differences that may exist or arise to exhibit the forbearance [sic] becoming a powerful nation rather than the sensibility belonging to a gallant people.”⁵

Populism again rose at the end of the 19th century with the rise of the “People’s Party.” In 1892, that party looked on the verge of staging a fight in the coming elections, but it seemed to fizzle out before it had a chance to evoke real change. The Democratic nominee in 1896, William Jennings Bryan, carried many of the ideals of the People’s Party, but he failed to win the presidency.

Even though populism has come and gone and come back again in America and Europe, the common theme has withstood the test of time: people were sick of the so-

3 Will Kirby, “Le Pen backs Trump’s claim that NATO is ‘obsolete’ & vows to pull France out of alliance,” *Express Online*, March 29, 2017, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/785165/marine-le-pen-france-nato-obsolete-president-trump-ussr-vladimir-putin-newsnight> and Julia Manchester, “Le Pen criticizes Trump’s new found NATO stance,” *CNN Politics*, April 14, 2017, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/14/politics/le-pen-trump-nato/index.html>.

4 Geert Wilders, “Wilders’s Plan: Time for Liberation,” *Gatestone Institute: International Policy Council*, November 9, 2016, accessed June 10, 2017, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/9291/geert-wilders-liberation>.

5 James Richardson, ed. *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1789-1902* Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1902), 437.

called ‘ruling elite’ and wanted change; a president and government that will speak for the common people. The present class of populists (from Trump in America to Le Pen, Wilders, the Alternative for Germany, SYRIZA in Greece, and many others in Europe) look to survive longer than their historical predecessors.

The Foreign Policy of Populism

The foreign policy of populists is rooted in the idea that the United States cannot continue supporting the liberal order it created. Populists tend to be Lockian on the domestic front in that they believe the government exists because of them and solely for them. Any military action or any international interaction must be to protect or enhance the rights of citizens, or preserve the homeland. On the international front, populists tend to push Hobbesian realism where they see each nation as a sovereign entity that should not be infringed upon, unless said nation violates their international responsibilities.⁶

In Europe, the foreign policy of radical right populism was cultivated because of three elements: “the perception of the economic and social effects of globalization in the mid-1990s; the increased rate of European integration in the late 1990s; and, the launch of the US-led ‘war on terror’ after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001.”⁷ These facts most decidedly took attention away from home led to those left to rise up and demand more attention.

The rise of populism has led some to question the viability of the liberal world order as we now know it. Joseph Nye argues that the propagation of “public goods” has been spread too broadly; that citizens of countries like the United States believe the goods that the government provides should be for them and them alone.⁸ No longer should governments provide for developing countries and secure far off lands. Boyle argues that “historically the institutions of global order have mirrored the domestic structures of the most powerful states in the system.”⁹ That is to say liberal democracies have built international structures that have modeled its domestic structures. As liberal democracies have become more populist in nature, one can expect the international institutions to change along with their domestic counterparts. Specifically, in Europe, Jones argues that populism cannot dismantle Europe: “The countries of Europe are too interdependent both economically through integrated markets and politically via the institutions of the European Union for any one country to be immune from shocks emanating from the rest.”¹⁰ The world will soon see if his prediction is true as we watch the negotiations and

6 Walter Russell Mead, “The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy: What Populism Means for Globalism,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011): 35.

7 Christina Schori Liang, “Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right” in *Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right*, ed. Christina Schori Liang, (London: Routledge, 2016), 7-8.

8 Joseph Nye, “Will the Liberal Order Survive: The History of an Idea,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:2 (2017): 14.

9 Michael Boyle, “The Coming Illiberal Order,” *Survival* 58:2 (2016): 36.

10 Jones, “Populism in Europe,” 42.

finally the culmination of Brexit closely.

Populism and the Future of NATO

There are some who believe that NATO must transform itself in order to stay relevant. This would not be the first time NATO has been reinvented. After the end of the Cold War, many called for NATO to be dissolved. The West had won. The old nemesis Soviet Union had ceased to exist. What purpose did NATO have if they didn't have an enemy to fight against? A quick scan of the NATO website will present how NATO has transformed since the Cold War. It has expanded to as far east as Turkey and even has strategic partners such as South Korea and Japan far from its physical base. NATO's missions have moved from border states to completely outside of Europe. It can be argued that NATO has over-extended itself and expanded its role to areas outside its sphere of influence. This has diluted its core mission of securing North Atlantic countries.

The rise of populism in Europe and the United States has led some to question the role of NATO in Europe. Marine Le Pen pushed for "French independence." She feels the previous ruling parties have failed to put France first and instead have put Europe first. In the interview conducted by *Foreign Affairs* she questioned the assumption that the EU has helped bring peace to Europe. Instead she argued that peace brought on the EU. When talking about potential French isolation, Le Pen talks about French history of withdrawing from NATO; Le Pen recounts how General de Gaulle pulled France from NATO and she feels the debate now is similar to what it was in 1966.¹¹

Donald Trump had campaigned on questioning the US role in NATO. The heart of the issue was countries paying their fair share into NATO operations. He implied that US involvement in protecting NATO countries would be conditional on those countries paying their obligations.¹² However, Trump recently declared that the US would honor Article Five of NATO and unequivocally protect fellow member states. It is this ambiguous policy position that has Europe worried about the resolve of the US in times of trouble.

One of the major issues in this era of populism is that each country is more likely to focus on its own security issues. In Europe, Southern European countries along the Mediterranean will see the threat coming from North Africa and the Middle East whereas Eastern European countries view Russia as a threat.¹³ According to Galeotti, many citizens of Europe view security threats as a country specific problem.

11 Marine Le Pen, "France's Next Revolution: A Conversation with Marine Le Pen," *Foreign Affairs* 95:6 (2016): 5.

12 Julian Ubriaco, "NATO's Baltic Problem: How Populism, Russia, and the Baltic can Fracture NATO," *Harvard International Review* 38:2 (2017): 13.

13 Mark Galeotti, "Will the populist wave wash away NATO and the European Union?" *NATO Review*, January 12, 2017, accessed June 17, 2017, <http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2017/Also-in-2017/will-populist-wave-wash-nato-european-union/EN/index.htm>.

Recommendations

During the first transformation of NATO after the Cold War, Asmus and Holbrooke argued that three things happened that cemented NATO's role for the future: 1) It stopped ethnic cleansing in the Balkans; 2) It brought former Warsaw Pact countries under its influence through expansion; and 3) It engaged Russia.¹⁴ This reinvention and subsequent "re-reinvention" after the 9/11 attacks led to a more globalized NATO. A simple glance at the NATO interactive map¹⁵ will show that NATO's security challenges are clustered in member countries and border countries while "NATO in Action" is spread from Europe to East Africa and Central Asia. Perhaps a new reinvention of NATO is needed in order to make it more palatable to member nations and their citizens which are increasingly questioning their roles in international institutions.

To that end, this paper recommends three suggestions to secure the relevancy of NATO in the face of rising populism: 1) Instead of fighting populism, fight the problems that had led to the rise of populism; 2) With the view that nations are turning inward and focusing on domestic issues, NATO should retrench to within its borders and extricate itself from areas far from its immediate sphere of influence; and, 3) NATO needs to engage Russia, not recreate it as the needed enemy.

Fixing the Problems that Caused Populism's Rise

The rise of populism in Europe has been at least a 10 year journey. For an outsider, it seems as if this sudden populist surge has come out of nowhere, but it has been simmering just beneath the surface; waiting for the leaders that will listen to the people's demands and lead populism to political prominence. Economic issues that many in the Euro zone are either experiencing or helping to alleviate have helped bring on the populist surge. But it is not the only factor in the current rise of populism. Muddle has described the situation in Europe thusly:

"The threat of terrorism and anxiety about a massive wave of immigrants from the Muslim world, coupled with the widespread belief that the EU hinders rather than helps when it comes to such problems, have created a perfect storm for populists, especially enhancing the standing of right-wing populists in many countries."¹⁶

Traditionally, the rise of populism has coincided with economic struggles of the lower classes. While economics still play an important role in the distrust of the ruling elite, Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin found another important issue to American populists. In a study of Massachusetts Tea-Partiers, the authors found that 78% of those that responded to the survey found immigration and border issues to be "very important." That is

¹⁴ Ronald D. Asmus, and Richard C. Holbrooke, "Re-inventing NATO," (paper presented at the Riga NATO Summit, Riga, Latvia, November 27-29, 2006), 1-2.

¹⁵ This map can be found at <http://www.nato.int/nato-on-the-map/#>.

¹⁶ Cas Muddle, "Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making," *Foreign Affairs* 95:6 (2016): 25.

compared to 87% that found “Deficits and Spending” to be their top issue.¹⁷

The rise of populism in both Europe and the United States has similar undertones: economic instability and fear of immigrants. The reasons behind the rise of populism are much more complex, but the driving force seems to be a combination of economic uncertainty and immigration. The Democrats in America and the opposition parties in Europe need to work with the people and find solutions to their problems. Having citizens engaged in politics and interested in the issues of the day can only lead to better governance. What needs attention are the issues that drove people to political activism. Those opposition politicians need to figure out how to combat economic instability and make policies regarding immigration that will still be humanitarian and yet not disenfranchising to its own citizens.

Retrenching NATO

The increased role of NATO in Middle Eastern and North African crises has played a direct role in the rise of populism. Some have said the very people who are terrorizing Western countries and cities had been radicalized because of US and NATO action.¹⁸ This radicalization has been happening since the Soviet-Afghanistan war in the 1980s and continues with the latest example of ISIS gaining power in Libya after the NATO operation concluded in 2011. There is no empirical evidence to date that links NATO operations with terrorist recruitment, but circumstantial evidence is there.

NATO’s stated purpose is “to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means.”¹⁹ The general purpose is rather abstract and allows for much interpretation. Conducting military operations around the globe can be rationalized as guaranteeing the security of NATO members. NATO has been re-invented numerous times in the past. Asmus and Holbrooke recount how NATO reinvented itself at the end of the Cold War; and called for NATO to re-reinvent itself after September 11, 2001 to consider challenges far from NATO’s borders.²⁰

At the same conference, Krastev surmised that the “real threat to NATO’s future role... [was] the lack of transatlantic consensus on the political nature of the world.”²¹ He was talking about the rise of populism and the movement’s disdain for the ‘global war on terrorism.’ Considering the rise of populism has continued unabated, it would be wise for NATO to follow the advice of Krastev and not Asmus and Holbrooke.

Taking into account the rhetoric regarding NATO by populist politicians would be

17 Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9:1 (2011): 33.

18 Seumas Milne, “Now the truth emerges: how the US fuelled the rise of Isis in Syria and Iraq,” *The Guardian*, June 3, 2015, accessed June 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/03/us-isis-syria-iraq>.

19 “What is NATO?” NATO, accessed June 17, 2017, <http://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index.html>.

20 Asmus and Holbrooke, “Re-reinventing NATO,” 1-2.

21 Ivan Krastev, “NATO in the Age of Populism,” (paper presented at the Riga Conference, Riga, Latvia, November 27-29, 2006), 4.

wise. Trump has called NATO obsolete and European populists have promised to pull their countries out if elected. If NATO can show the people of America and Europe that its efforts directly benefit them, NATO can survive the potential populist purge. Getting back to roots of collective security can help show populists that NATO works for them and their security. Major argued that re-emphasizing collective security was not necessarily going back to the roots because the environment in which it is happening has changed dramatically.²² I disagree as getting back to collective security is going back to the root objective of NATO during the Cold War era. The fact that the environment has changed does not change the idea that collective security at home had been an original intent of NATO.

Retrenching to its borders can also show citizens of member countries that NATO is working for them. Another core objective of NATO is crisis management. Too often NATO has managed crises outside of its borders yet the biggest threats on its borders are not getting the focus they need. The exception is NATO's work with the migration crisis. Even here, NATO needs to take a leading role and publicize their efforts to show citizens the work they are doing. Because there are ongoing crises at home such as an influx of migrants and terrorist attacks, NATO would be best served to retrench and focus on the home-front.

Another issue NATO needs to be concerned about is the rise and influence of Russia. After Russia annexed Crimea, NATO and Russia ceased "dialogue and cooperation structures."²³ In order to solidify NATO and appease populists, it would be wise to engage and not alienate Russia.

Engaging Russia

Major argues that NATO must engage Russia, but it "must wait until Russia has made substantial progress in implementing Minsk II."²⁴ If NATO would engage before implementation of Minsk II, then it would appear weak and acquiescing to Russia's aggression. So far, it seems as if Russia is not willing to implement the agreement because Russia does not want peace.²⁵ Thus, it would be difficult to engage if Russia does not comply.

There are those who believe engagement is the wrong policy. Ringsmose and Rynning argue that NATO must strengthen its deterrence posture against Russia, but they concede that doing so may be difficult with the rise of populist leaders.²⁶ Kroenig argues that

22 Claudia Major, "NATO and European Security: Back to the Roots," *IAI Working Papers* 15:53 (2015): 7-8.

23 *Ibid.*, 14.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Steven Pifer, "Order from Chaos: Minsk at Two Years," *Brookings Institute*, February 15, 2017, accessed June 17, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/02/15/minsk-ii-at-two-years/>.

26 Jens Ringsmose & Sten Rynning, "Now for the Hard Part: NATO's Strategic Adaptation to Russia," *Survival*, 59:3 (2017): 142-143.

NATO must be prepared to respond to Russian aggression against a member, but cautions that building up NATO's nuclear capabilities in Eastern Europe may lead to nuclear war.²⁷ While the concerns these authors raise are to be heeded, engagement is the best policy for strengthening NATO and appeasing populists.

If Russia were to implement the Minsk II agreement, Major gave three recommendations on how to engage Russia: 1) Communication and dialogue; 2) Confidence Building and Rules; and 3) Practical Cooperation.²⁸ Dialogue can begin once NATO sees progress on Minsk II. In the meantime, NATO and Russia need to assure each other that any military exercises do not inadvertently spark confrontation. Simple cooperation in practical matters can also form a basis for further cooperation. Major suggests looking to Scandinavia for examples of practical cooperation avenues that can be pursued.

Conclusion

In the end, the most significant issue of 2017 is the rise of populism and how people, countries and international organizations will effectively deal with the change in political climate. For its part, NATO must re-invent itself again in order to make sure its purpose is focused on the citizens of member countries. This does not mean it has no place in operations outside of its borders; it means that it must be judicious in choosing which operations to pursue. The last thing it needs is wavering members whose politicians must pay heed to its citizens who may question why its soldiers are fighting in far off lands.

NATO needs to play a role in fixing the problems that have led to the rise in populism. It must fight terrorism at home, and work toward an agreeable solution to the migrant problems. If NATO is able to re-invent itself again, it will again prove to be an international organization vital to world peace and stability.

Finally, NATO must be at the forefront of engaging Russia. Of course, Russia must first comply with the Minsk II agreement. Once it does work toward implementation, NATO must be first in line to actively engage Russia to help secure peace and stability in Europe in this time of political climate change.

²⁷ Matthew Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War," *Survival* 57:1 (2015):65.

²⁸ Major, "NATO and European Security," 15.

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