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Keating, Vincent; Ruzicka, Jan

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Trust, Obligation, and Reciprocity in NATO

Vincent Charles Keating, Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark
Jan Ruzicka, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University

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Introduction
In May 2017, United States President Donald J Trump traveled to his first annual meeting of NATO heads of states in Brussels. The apprehension preceding the visit over what President Trump would say was quickly confirmed. As was widely reported at that time, Trump’s address to the allies made no mention of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Instead, he emphasized the demand that the allies dedicate a higher share of their GDP to defense. Trump reminded them that “23 of the 28 member nations are still not paying what they should be paying and what they are supposed to be paying.” Moreover, he warned, they owed the United States “massive amounts” of money from previous years (Rucker, DeYoung, and Birnbaum 2017).

Although hardly unexpected given the views President Trump expressed on NATO during his election campaign, he caused considerable anxiety among the European allies as well as many American observers, who wondered about America’s commitment to the alliance. Former US ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, wrote that “after calling Nato ‘obsolete’ Trump needed to say what every predecessor since Truman has said: the US is committed to article 5. He didn’t. This is a major blow to the alliance,” adding that, “unfortunately, Nato today is more divided than ever.” (Borger 2017) Thomas Wright, the director of the Centre on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution, argued that the speech was “a policy failure of epic proportions,” increasing the risk that the Russians would test President Trump in the coming years (Borger 2017). Perhaps most tellingly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly announced that the Europeans would have to “take our fate into our own hands” in the absence of American and British leadership, because “the times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over.” (Henley 2017)

Despite President Trump’s subsequent clarification that the United States would uphold Article 5, the initial omission still resonated across the alliance. While a sense of a crisis is anything but new in the relationship between the United States and Europe, President Trump’s words seem to be more radical than ever. And yet, as we argue in this article, following his rhetoric may give a misleading picture of the state of the alliance. Since its inception, NATO has led to the formation of trusting relationships based on the underlying expectations of obligations and reciprocity. These trusting relationships are not only vital to the proper functioning of the alliance, but alliances are unique venues to build and sustain trusting relationships between states exactly because of the explicit roles obligation and reciprocity play in them.

Thus, rather than downplaying the transatlantic link, President Trump’s demands reinforce our claim for the existence of deeply embedded trusting relationships between the allies. And he is not alone in these demands. Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has equally argued that European allies need to invest more in ‘smart defense’ with a focus on working together to gain
greater flexibility, as “an alliance that brings Europe and North America together requires an equitable sharing of the burden ...” (Rasmussen 2011, 5-6)

While it might be difficult to credit President Trump with knowingly and strategically reasserting the need for reciprocity based on obligations that are central to trusting relationships in the alliance, the underlying message is clear: NATO cannot survive unless commitments derived from the alliance are met by all, or at the very least most, of its members. The problem is therefore only partly the undiplomatic rhetoric of the current American president, because the rhetoric itself echoes a central U.S. concern about obligation and reciprocity: the unwillingness or the inability of the European allies to act in such way that would sustain the existing trusting relationships.

**Trust in Military Alliances**

Yves Boyer (2014, 69) has noted that “alliances are first and foremost about confidence, trust and protection.” Although few would probably dissent from this characterization, it raises two obvious questions. First, what exactly are we talking about when referring to trust among allies? Second, how does trust come about in military alliances and what, on the other hand, undermines it?

Most of the scholarly writing on alliances has steered clear of these questions, because the dominant assumption has been that alliances are marriages of convenience lasting only so long as they pay off for the states involved. In other words, scholars tend to focus mainly on the protection element of Boyer’s characterization, at the expense of trust. That the allies could actually build something like a trusting relationship is either overlooked or outright dismissed. We believe that we should consider Boyer’s statement in its entirety; ignoring the importance of trust for alliances is a grave mistake.

Following from our previous work on the subject, we conceive of trust as an ideational structure that allows actors to put aside risk and uncertainty which are inherent to any interaction between states (Keating and Ruzicka 2014). In the alliance setting, the key risks have been identified long ago by Glenn Snyder as the dilemmas of abandonment and entrapment (Snyder 1984). When allies form trusting relationships they cognitively neglect or downplay these two dilemmas, despite the fact that the possibility of defection never goes away. As a consequence, instead of hedging against the potential defection of their allies, for instance, by overinvesting in their own independent military capabilities, they can devote their resources to more productive uses.

Trusting relationships do not form automatically among allies. Actors need to assess each other’s trustworthiness. Such assessments have both a rational and a social component.¹ The rational component involves calculating trust as the probability that a state is likely to be trustworthy, which, in the case of alliances, tends to revolve around whether states will fulfil their alliance commitments. Most rationalist scholars argue that these estimates are based on prior observation of states’ behavior through a Bayesian method, whereby expectations are adjusted upwards or downwards based on a state’s previous record of cooperation or defection.

Though an inescapable element in understanding trust, we argue that a purely rational assessment of trust within an alliance setting is not sufficient. To it, we must add a social component of trust,

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¹ For the different theoretical perspectives on trust in international politics, see (Ruzicka and Keating 2015)
where states base their judgments on social factors such as group membership, common values, pre-existing social norms, and working towards common goals (Rousseau et al. 1998, 399, Hurley 2011, 30, Parsons 1969, 336-337, Keating and Thrandardottir 2017). Actors tend to trust others with whom they are in a social alignment more than those with whom they are not. These social characteristics, when present, allow actors to overdraw on the existing information, the rational component, to cognitively discount any potential negative consequences that could arise from the mutual interaction.

While the way in which trust is assessed is reasonably understandable, how trusting relationships can come about in alliances is neither straightforward nor inevitable. States remain sovereign actors that cannot be forced to trust - but they have the option to do so. As we will argue in an upcoming edited monograph (Keating and Ruzicka), there are three factors that make trusting relationships more likely within alliances: the specific obligations that a formal military alliance creates (for example, coming to each other’s aid), the expectations that these obligations will be met, and the ongoing opportunities to reciprocate within the alliance structure. These important structural characteristics of alliances enable their members to not only gauge trustworthiness in ways that are simply not available to them when taking the measure of non-allies, but also to forge and reinforce a sense of common values, rules, and goals.

Reciprocity is thus one of the defining features of alliances when it comes to trust. Obligations, outlined by the treaty forming the alliance and those developed through the course of interaction among allies, are accompanied by the expectation that the other states will fulfil them, even when it might be temporarily inconvenient for them to do so. Meeting these duties repeatedly strengthens the assessments of both rational and social components of trustworthiness. From a rationalist account of trust, meeting obligations provides positive information that is then used to calculate the probability of an ally meeting their obligation in future. From a social account of trust, meeting duties reinforces the signal that the group is still working together towards common goals under a set of common values. When allies do not reciprocate and do not meet the shared expectations, trusting relationships will deteriorate and may even collapse. The failure to live up to alliance commitments, norms and obligations is best seen as negative information about the trustworthiness of the actor and also potentially signals a break in a presumed set of shared goals and values.

**Reciprocity in NATO**

NATO is a highly unequal alliance in terms of the size, power, and relative conventional military vulnerability of its individual member states. Not all states in the alliance are thus required to contribute the same amount to collective defense. Nevertheless, over the course of the alliance’s existence, the allies developed a norm whereby states should all contribute 2% of their GDP to defense. The figure was originally adopted by NATO states in 2002 (Mölling 2014, 1), and reaffirmed as a target in 2014, when it was accepted as a goal that all allies should reach by 2024. The 2% expenditure pledge, though not legally binding, was seen as a historic step in formalizing the idea of burden sharing among the members (Techau 2015).

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2 For earlier considerations of trust and trust-building within alliances, see (Keating 2015)
The norm of 2% spending has been formalized at a point in the history of the alliance characterized by simultaneous decreases in European defense spending and increases in the defense spending of the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, the European NATO states have cut their defense spending by almost 20% during a period when their GDP grew on average 55%. As a result, the European share of defense expenditures in NATO taken as a whole has fallen from 34% in 1991 to 21% in 2011 (Rasmussen 2011, 3).

While we wish to focus on what the 2% figure tells us about the state of trusting relationships, the existing literature generally understands the 2% figure through the lens of burden sharing. Burden sharing within NATO has traditionally referred to as the transatlantic bargain, where U.S. defense commitment to the allies is matched by European contributions towards their own defense (Cooper and Zycher 1989, 2). The cost of membership, which produces the gain of the mutual protection offered by NATO, is to make financial contributions to the common infrastructure used by the alliance (Hartley and Sandler 1999, 666). The precise nature and extent of these contributions was unclear at the beginning of the alliance, but several different targets spanning multiple areas have been suggested throughout its history (Cooper and Zycher 1989, 3, Sandler and Shimizu 2014, 45-47, Tonelson 2000, 31-38).

Burden sharing within NATO has always been contentious because, as Charles Cooper and Benjamin Zycher (1989, 1) put it, “defense is expensive, democracies always face budget pressures, politicians are disposed to argue that allies are not doing their fair share, and diplomats are equally disposed to hope that the problem will go away if nobody talks about it.” In general, the United States has long argued that it carries a disproportionate amount of the alliance burden, while the European allies pointed out that much of the US spending is on non-European concerns. They also stress that they make disproportionately high contributions towards NATO infrastructure or UN peacekeeping missions (Sandler and Murdoch 2000, 299). NATO has historically lacked a detailed burden-sharing regime, which has left room for contention over what should be considered fair contribution. At the same time, however, the very arguments that NATO constantly has over the meaning of equitable and fair contribution suggests that there is a unified social understanding of reciprocity as a central element of the alliance.

While most of the scholarship has viewed the 2% number through this burden-sharing lens, we wish to appropriate it to demonstrate the importance of reciprocity and obligation in maintaining trusting relationships in the alliance context. Seen from this perspective, despite the rhetoric of President Trump regarding the obsolescence of NATO and his delay in openly supporting Article 5, the actions of the United States over the past number of years speak to a state that is actively signaling its intent to make good on its alliance obligations. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the prolonged crisis in eastern Ukraine caused by Russian-backed separatists, the United States has significantly increased its spending in the European theatre (Ruzicka 2015). In an effort to simultaneously reassure its allies and deter Russia, the United States has moved both personnel and material to Europe on a scale not seen since the end of the Cold War.

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3 This reinforces an idea we put forward in a previous paper, which argues for a prioritization of the behavioral manifestations of trusting relationships over discursive manifestations, see (Keating and Ruzicka 2014)
In 2015 alone, the United States implemented troop rotations to the front-line European allies at the cost of nearly $1 billion (Doran 2015, 259). The ensuing European Reassurance Initiative allocated $4 billion to increase the number of U.S. Brigade Combat Teams in Europe from two to three and added another airborne brigade. Additionally, the United States permanently pre-positioned equipment for another brigade in Europe, should it be necessary (Sokolsky 2017, 3).

Alongside the American efforts to counter the Russian threat, the alliance as a whole adopted a number of measures designed to reinforce the political and military commitment to the states on the eastern flank. This included the adoption of the Readiness Action Plan to increase NATO’s deterrent posture, and a reaffirmation of the 2% pledge by the member states. This pledge can be seen both as a costly signal, a typical example of rationalist mechanism to explain trust (Fearon 1994, Kydd 2000, 326), and signal of obligation and reciprocity in the face of the U.S. investments into the alliance. However, within the NATO setting it is more significant that states do not see the need to establish any formal oversight mechanisms and are content to rely on the trusting relationships they have established among themselves. In other words, the way the members have gone about the 2% commitment, particularly with respect to the lack of direct hedging against the possibility that one or more allies will defect, suggests a reasonably high level of trust among the allies.4

Our argument here is simply that the focus on the 2% figure should not be seen as another case of the United States attempting to shift the balance of alliance burdens. Far more is at stake. After all, there are “a thousand different ways” to evaluate alliance burden sharing, and the 2% figure has been criticized for being both arbitrary and nonsensical as a target to promote the proper functioning of the alliance (Mattelaer 2016, 26-27, Mölling 2014, Techau 2015). Instead, we argue that the 2% pledge should be understood as a call for reciprocity, a reminder to the other allies that NATO is based on reciprocal relationships, and that this signal of reciprocity helps to maintain trusting relationships that stabilize the alliance and help it to function more efficiently.

Conclusion

Words matter in international politics. If it were otherwise, there would hardly have been much concern over President Trump’s statements and what they might mean to the future of NATO. However, we propose that observers and practitioners should look beyond the immediate rhetoric, which is admittedly controversial, and try to understand these claims through the lens of the trusting relationships that the alliance has helped to establish. In that light, it becomes apparent that the rhetoric is not simply about who is spending what, but an attempt to maintain the sense of obligation and mutual reciprocity that build and support trusting relationships, without which the alliance would have much more difficulty operating. In short, living up to verbally made commitments is just as important as addressing one’s allies without insulting them or raising doubts about the mutual obligations.

For NATO, like for any military alliance, the problem has always been whether it can survive the moment when the payoff structure of mutual cooperation changes. Trusting relationships, which

4 For a more detailed explanation of the relationship between trust and hedging, see (Keating and Ruzicka 2014)
should not be confused with a harmony of interests, forged over the decades of NATO’s existence enable the allies to mitigate this problem, because they need not worry about relative gains and they can rely on allies to reciprocate the alliance obligations where politically possible. In the absence of trust, the NATO allies might have to begin to hedge increasingly against the possibility of American retreat from basic alliance commitments, as implied by Angela Merkel’s reaction. This could, in turn, lead to a spiral of distrust where less and less emphasis is placed on acting like an alliance, while more and more emphasis is placed on ensuring each state’s individual security. Needless to say, this would be a sub-optimal outcome for all states concerned. Irrespective of whether his statements were either knowledgeable or intentional, President Trump’s comments are important not simply as a request for more money, but as a reminder to everyone in the alliance that the reciprocity and the obligations on which it is based continue to make NATO’s existence possible.

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