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The Historic Alliance between the United States and Europe
Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the
Environment
Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns
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Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Kinzinger, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our vital alliance with Europe.

Maintaining U.S. leadership in the NATO Alliance and sustaining the critical relationship between the U.S. and the European Union will continue to be among the most vital strategic aims of the United States in the decade ahead. Both of our political parties and the great majority of Americans in recent public opinion polls support a continuation of American leadership in NATO. We should also continue to view the over 500 million people who live in the European Union as our allies, friends and economic partners.

In my own Foreign Service career as U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Ambassador to Greece and Under Secretary of State, I saw time and again how the European allies and Canada are critical to America's security in a dangerous world. That remains true today as it will surely be in the future.

Our Common History

During the seventy-four years since the Allied victory in the Second World War, no part of the world has been more important to the security and prosperity of the United States than Europe.

America's post-war leaders—Truman and Eisenhower, Marshall, Acheson, Dulles and others—understood that our experiences in the First and Second World Wars and the advent of the Cold War compelled us to think in new ways about how to defend America in a dangerous world.

They resolved that the United States could not, once again, retreat into isolation after the supreme effort we had made to defeat the fascist powers. We would have to lead, on a permanent basis, as the strongest economic, political and military power in the world. In order to do so, their great insight was that the U.S. could no longer defend its own borders without deploying American land, naval and air forces permanently in Europe well beyond the U.S. itself. This was a decision based on our own self-interest. It permitted us to defend our security and that of our allies in Europe and Canada who shared our most important values—democracy, human and religious rights, the rule of law, and a belief in free markets.

This strategy led the U.S. to take two historic decisions, on a bipartisan basis, in the years after World War Two.

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The first was to create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) here in Washington seventy years ago next week in April 1949. For the first time in its history, the U.S. committed to help defend the security of allied countries on a permanent basis.

The second was to encourage the European countries, struggling to recover from war, to integrate their economies and political future in a new supranational effort that led from the Coal and Steel Community of the late 1940s to the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the Common Market, the Maastricht Agreement and the creation of the European Union we know and admire today.

Every American President from Truman and Eisenhower to George W. Bush and Barack Obama shared the common strategic view that the success and freedom of Europe was critical to our values, interests and success in the world.

In creating and leading NATO over the last seven decades, American leaders accepted the new reality that the U.S. would be stronger and more secure in alliance with others. In supporting European integration, the U.S. helped France and Germany to achieve a historic and permanent reconciliation. Together, NATO and the European Union became the twin standard bearers of the free world we worked to sustain.

Through the decades, the U.S., Canada and Europe helped to create other important multilateral institutions such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and many others that helped to form a network for democracy, human rights, free trade and free markets.

A Europe Whole, Free and at Peace

This historic American policy succeeded even beyond the hopes of its founders. NATO deterred a Soviet attack on Western Europe during more than four decades of the Cold War. The close U.S. economic and trade relationship with Europe and Canada produced unprecedented economic growth and prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic. The Cold War ended with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and with it the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself. More than 100 million East Europeans were freed from behind the Iron Curtain.

This helped to create, in the words of President George H.W. Bush, a Europe “whole, free and at peace”. The resulting transatlantic community is now the largest democratic group of countries in the world—nearly 900 million people living in free societies, protected by the rule of law and by the most powerful military alliance in history.

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The creation of this community is one of the great achievements of American foreign policy in our history. And it remains of incalculable benefit to the U.S.

The Future of American Policy toward Europe

As we consider our current and future strategy towards Europe, we should maintain and modernize this successful bipartisan policy of the last seven decades.

One of our central aims should be to lead and continue to build a strong NATO. In a recent Harvard University report entitled “NATO at 70: An Alliance in Crisis”, Ambassador Doug Lute and I (both of us are former American Ambassadors to NATO), argued that NATO remains absolutely vital for America’s most important strategic interests.

NATO is the core organization that keeps Europeans and North Americans free and secure from conventional and nuclear threats. It deters Russian President Vladimir Putin from invading or seeking to destabilize our NATO allies in Eastern Europe.

The NATO allies also share the burden with us of our military deployments outside of Europe. Many of the NATO allies are serving with our forces today in the successful anti-ISIS coalition in northern Syria, in counter terrorist efforts in the Horn of Africa and in West Africa. They have assisted the U.S. in Iraq. The European allies have taken over complete responsibility for the peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and the majority of the effort in Kosovo. As you know, all of the NATO allies have deployed with us to Afghanistan since 2003. Many are still there with us today.

I witnessed the value of NATO on 9/11 as U.S. Ambassador to the Alliance. The Ambassadors of Canada and the European allies came to me that afternoon at NATO Headquarters outside of Brussels to pledge to help defend us. Together, we invoked the Article 5 Mutual Defense Clause of the NATO Treaty for the first and only time the day after those horrible attacks.

Our allies acted to defend us because they understood their security was linked directly with our own. Their decision to fight with us was also based on the knowledge that we are all stronger in alliance than on our own. And they believed in our leadership.

Since going into Afghanistan with us, the NATO allies and partners have suffered more than 1000 combat deaths. I have often reflected on this simple but central lesson from 9/11—it is good for the United States to have such friends in the world who share our values and who stand with us when times are toughest.

It would be a mistake, however, to view NATO solely through the prism of our history. NATO is also critical for our future. Because our armed forces have permanent access to a labyrinth of NATO

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ground, air and naval bases throughout Europe, the U.S. is a continent closer to the threats we face in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

NATO is also the most significant power differential between the U.S. and our greatest adversary in Europe—the Russian Federation. We can call on twenty-eight other countries to share the strategic burden and the financial cost of our military operations. We have allies who see the world the way we do and will act with us. Russia does not have a single such ally.

In similar fashion, the U.S. has relied on the European Union as our closest economic and political partner in the world. Our largest trade relationship is with the EU. The largest investors in the U.S. economy are the countries of the EU. We are the two largest global economies. We have been together the foremost advocates for free and fair trade in the world, for human rights and for the rule of law.

During the George W. Bush Administration, the U.S. worked closely with the EU and its member states—France, Germany and the United Kingdom—to sanction Iran and pressure it to agree to negotiations over its nuclear weapons ambitions. During the Obama Administration, the U.S. and EU helped to lead the way toward the Iran Nuclear Deal as well as the Paris Climate Change Agreement of 2015.

This is not to argue that our interests are completely symmetrical with the EU or the NATO allies. We are often competitors, as well as partners, in trade. U.S. leaders of both parties, led by President Trump during the last two years, have also long been rightly frustrated by low European defense spending, in particular by Germany, the wealthiest of all the European countries. The Trump Administration and its predecessors have also argued that Europe is excessively reliant on Russian natural gas exports.

In addition, the Administration has been right recently to urge Europe not to become reliant on Chinese companies in the race for dominance in 5G and the other digital age technologies critical for the future. Over this past weekend, unfortunately, the government of Italy joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, giving Beijing unprecedented reach into the economies and industrial infrastructure of southern Europe to add to their investments in Greece and the Balkan countries. The U.S. will need to work hard to convince other European countries from taking the same step.

There is no doubt, however, that the many positive benefits of our relationship with NATO and the European Union far outweigh such disagreements. Every President, Republican and Democrat, has understood that the U.S. is far stronger with the NATO allies than without them.

President Trump, unfortunately, has chosen to become NATO's chief critic rather than its strong and unifying leader. As a result, we are experiencing one of the most profound transatlantic disputes since the creation of NATO.

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Ambassador Lute and I stated in our recent report on NATO that the major challenge the Alliance faces in 2019 is the absence of strong, principled American Presidential leadership for the first time in its history.

President Trump has failed to commit that the U.S. would honor its Article 5 commitments to allies in a crisis. This is the bedrock commitment that all our previous Presidents have honored. In addition, he has failed to stand up to President Putin’s aggression towards our 2016 elections and to Putin’s attempt to destabilize the Dutch, French and German elections in 2017. It was Congress, not President Trump, which insisted the U.S. impose sanctions on Russia in 2017 for this attack on western democracies.

He has been a frequent and caustic critic of some of our closest friends in Europe—including Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Emmanuel Macron, Prime Minister Teresa May and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—while embracing publicly some of Europe’s most authoritarian leaders such as Viktor Orban in Hungary, the Turkish and Polish governments as well as anti-democratic leaders in the Italian coalition.

This jarring juxtaposition—the American President appearing to side with anti-democratic populists in Europe against the true champions of democracy and the rule of law—has done significant harm to the reputation and credibility of the U.S. in Europe.

President Trump has also characterized the European Union as a “foe” of the U.S. That statement alone turns more than seventy years of carefully constructed American policy on its head. His open animus towards the European Union and his threats of a trade war with Brussels are deeply mistaken.

The Trump Administration has spurned the partnership President Obama had created with Europe in forging the Paris Climate Change Agreement. It took the U.S. out of the Iran Nuclear Agreement that we had negotiated in strength alongside the EU, Britain, Germany and France. It is now imposing secondary sanctions on European countries that continue to trade with Iran. These steps and others have created a level of anger and frustration with the United States that I believe is unprecedented.

He is the first American President to turn away from the close security, political, trade and diplomatic ties that have made our friendship with Europe the greatest force for democracy and peace in modern history.

Policy Challenges for the United States in 2019

Maintaining the NATO Alliance and a close partnership with the European Union remain essential for the security and economic success of the United States. We have a number of tough challenges ahead on which we will need the support and strength of both institutions in 2019 and beyond.

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First, we will need to strengthen NATO’s armored capacity in Europe to contain Russian power, particularly in Eastern Europe. In this respect, the strong support of Congress in supporting and funding the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) to rebuild U.S military strength in Europe has been essential.

As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Joseph Dunford, told the Atlantic Council last week, it will also be essential to maintain American forces on the European continent as NATO provides the U.S. “a comparative advantage over Russia”.

NATO must also be much better organized under American leadership to counter Russia’s hybrid offensive against our elections and in Moscow’s attempt to destabilize our internal politics.

The U.S. should continue to push the European allies and Canada to spend more on their defense by reaching the 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product level expected of all allies by 2024. The allies should assume increased responsibility for NATO missions in the decade ahead.

Second, the U.S. should support those allies—Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and others—who are combating the threat of anti-democratic populism in Europe today. In this respect, the U.S. and the allies need to find ways to admonish and pressure those allies—Hungary, Poland and Turkey—whose governments are adopting authoritarian policies. This threatens the values that bind NATO together as an alliance of democracies.

Third, we will also need to wage a broader, global “battle of ideas” against the power and self-confidence of the major authoritarian powers, Russia and China. They are seeking to delegitimize democracy, free elections and human rights in favor of their authoritarian model. This contest of ideas is being waged within Europe and around the world. Just as John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and other American Presidents saw this as a fundamental test in the past, we should do so in our time as well.

The U.S. will need the weight and moral authority of the European allies to help win this battle to defend our democratic and rule of law societies in the decade ahead.

Fourth, we will also need Europe’s support and active involvement as we wage a second global battle in the years ahead with China—the “battle for technological dominance”—in Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Quantum Computing, Biotechnology and other fields. This contest may well determine whether the U.S. can maintain in future decades the long superiority we have had in qualitative military power over our rivals. We cannot afford to lose this advantage to China.

Given the damage President Trump has caused to our relationship with the EU and NATO, Congress should continue to exercise its constitutional responsibilities to reaffirm our treaty commitments to

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NATO and the importance of our relationship with the European Union. Congress must limit and block, if necessary, the most dangerous policies of the President.

Congressional resolutions in support of NATO in 2018 were important in reassuring Europeans and their governments of our continued commitment. If the President moves to limit the U.S. troop contribution to NATO or, unthinkable, to seek to remove the U.S. from NATO altogether, Congress with the support of both parties, must move to block him.

Conclusion

The great Transatlanticist, Winston Churchill, reminded Americans of our importance to the free world at the height of the Second World War. In September 1943, Churchill said in a speech at Harvard about America's global role: "The price of greatness is responsibility." He added, "one cannot rise to be in many ways the leading community in the civilized world without being involved in its problems, convulsed by its agonies and inspired by its causes."

Churchill's war-time ally, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, echoed him by stating in his Fourth Inaugural Address in January 1945 when victory was imminent: "We have learned to be citizens of the world, members of the human community. We have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that "The only way to have a friend is to be one."

Chairman Keating and Ranking Member Kinzinger, these central truths about America's role in the world are under challenge today by those who would have us retreat from global responsibility and power.

I believe the United States is still the country that Churchill and Roosevelt described in their remarks. The U.S. is the greatest force for stability, for good and for peace in the world today. If we have learned one central lesson from World War Two until now, it is that to defend our country at home, we must remain engaged overseas with our democratic allies in NATO and the European Union.

As we look to the future, Americans can feel confident that we will be more secure, more prosperous and more confident about the continuation of human freedom if we maintain our historic, successful and irreplaceable alliance with Europe and Canada in the decades ahead.