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NATO's Rot From Within

A worrying percentage of European publics don't want to honor the fundamental tenet of the Atlantic alliance.

By Bruce Stokes

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At the 1949 signing ceremony for the Washington Treaty that created NATO, a band played show tune selections from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, including "I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'" and "It Ain't Necessarily So."

Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, what NATO itself calls the cornerstone of the alliance, commits members to come to each other's defense. Sixty-six years after NATO's creation, a recent Pew Research Center survey of people in nine NATO nations, representing the lion's share of NATO defense spending, suggests public commitment to Article 5 "ain't necessarily so."

At a time of tensions with Russia not seen since the Cold War, many publics in the Western alliance are divided in their support for a potential military confrontation with Moscow over its territorial ambitions. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, NATO's challenges are now not just "from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic," but at home.

In the first instance, NATO publics differ over their perception of the security challenge posed by Russia today. Seven in 10 Poles and nearly 6 in 10 Americans say Russia is a major military threat. But less than 4 in 10 Germans agree.

Against this backdrop of differing threat perceptions, public commitment to NATO is mixed at best.

Against this backdrop of differing threat perceptions, public commitment to NATO is mixed at best. Most Europeans hold the security alliance in high regard: 64 percent in France and Italy, compared with 60 percent in the United Kingdom, have a favorable view. Support is actually up 10 percentage points in the last year in Poland (74 percent). But just 49 percent of Americans say they have a favorable view of NATO. This sentiment has remained largely unchanged over the last six years and may reflect a general unease many Americans have with multilateral organizations.

And only 23 percent of Turks have a favorable opinion of NATO, while 50 percent are unfavorable, a low level of support that has existed for years. It is a bit ironic that Turks hold NATO in such low esteem at a time when Ankara is asking for NATO's political backing for its new military offensive against Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria.

More striking, German backing for NATO has fallen dramatically: 18 points in the last six years, from 73 percent in 2009 to 55 percent today. This drop off could be part of a general decline in faith in European institutions in the wake of the euro crisis. It could be a backlash against Germany's participation with other NATO nations in the War in Afghanistan. Or it may be a public recognition that Russia's aggression in Ukraine means NATO membership may actually lead to military conflict.

But it is not NATO's popularity that raises the most questions about the Western military alliance. It is the reluctance of publics in member states to come to each other's defense.

Half or more in Germany (58 percent), France (53 percent), and Italy (51 percent) believe that their country should not use military force to defend a NATO ally that is a neighbor of Russia if it got into a serious military conflict with Moscow. And only 49 percent of the British public, 48 percent of the Polish and Spanish publics, and just 29 percent of Turks are willing to live up to their Article 5 commitments.

Only the Americans (56 percent) and the Canadians (53 percent) stand ready to go to the defense of a NATO partner against Russia.

A closer look inside these public opinion numbers regarding NATO raises even more questions.

While 56 percent of Democrats in the United States have a favorable view of the alliance, just 43 percent of Republicans hold that positive opinion. At the same time, 69 percent of the GOP stands ready to go to a NATO ally's defense, but only 47 percent of Democrats support fulfilling America's Article 5 commitment.

In Germany, while 67 percent of Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union supporters have a favorable view of NATO, that positive assessment is shared by only 57 percent of Social Democratic Party backers and 49 percent of adherents to the Green Party. When it comes to defending a NATO ally, 61 percent of SPD supporters and 59 percent of Greens, along with about half (51 percent) of CDU and CSU adherents, believe Germany should *not* live up to its Article 5 commitments.

And the Pew Research findings highlight some other serious divisions within the alliance. For example, 62 percent of Americans favor offering NATO membership to Ukraine, but only 36 percent of Germans agree. Americans are divided over sending arms to Ukraine: 46 percent support, 43 percent oppose. Germans are clearly against such action: 77 percent oppose, 19 percent are in favor.

And the Pew Research survey raises questions about the Turkish public's commitment to the alliance. Only a third of Turks see Russia as a major military threat, compared with a median of 50 percent in the other eight NATO nations surveyed. Just 29 percent of Turks are willing to see their country go to the defense of another NATO ally, compared with a median of 48 percent in the other NATO members. Only 26 percent in Turkey would send arms to Ukraine, while a median of 41 percent support such action in the rest of the NATO countries surveyed.

This low level of Turkish support for NATO or relevant alliance actions is, in part, a reflection of the relatively high proportion of the population that has no opinion on these issues. More than a third (36 percent) does not know how they feel about arming the Ukrainians and roughly a quarter have no view on NATO (26 percent) or on living up to Article 5 (23 percent). This level of "don't knows" far exceeds that in other member countries, suggesting that much of the Turkish public may be unaware of its commitments and unengaged in policy discussions involving security. Russia and the Islamic State pose new challenges for NATO. Not the least of these is the divergence in public opinion among NATO member countries about the institution, mutual commitments within the alliance, and what to do about current threats. Governing elites may find they ignore these cleavages at their peril.