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5 on 45:  
On Trump's NATO stance

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

(Music)

WRIGHT: Hello, my name is Tom Wright. I'm a fellow with the Project on International Order and Strategy and a fellow with the Center for the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institutions, and I'd like to talk today about whether or not President Trump has reversed himself on NATO. We saw, during the week when he met with the Secretary General of NATO, he said that NATO was not obsolete. During the campaign, famously, he said that NATO was obsolete. This has been greeted as sign of an about-face by President Trump, and a growing normalization of his foreign policy. It came on the same day that Secretary Tillerson met with Lavrov and Putin in Moscow and was perceived to take a tough line with Russia, and said that the levels of trusts in the relationship were low; and it came a week after, or just a few days after, the Trump administration launched a military strike against the Assad regime in Syria, seemingly to contradict President Trump and then-candidate Trump's earlier statements that he would back Syria and stay out of the Syrian civil war. So the question really is, is President Trump reversing himself on foreign policy?

I think we should be careful, maybe not go that far this quickly, and actually sort of take stock of a few things that suggest these changes may be smaller than they appear. Let's take, firstly, the meeting with the NATO Secretary General and the comment about NATO not being obsolete. If one goes back to what President Trump when he was running for office about NATO, he said that NATO's original mission of

containing Russia in Europe was obsolete, and that NATO itself was obsolete because it wasn't focused on terrorism and other sort of modern challenges. If one unpacks what President Trump said the other day, he said that NATO was now relevant because it was focused on terrorism and because they had listened to his criticism and they were upping their involvement in the counterterrorism fight in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. But what he did not say was that NATO's original mission of containing or balancing Russia in Europe was no longer obsolete. He did not say, and he still has not said while president, that he will unconditionally back Article 5, which is the mutual security guarantee that the United States and all members of NATO commit to, to defend each other from attack. His Secretary of Defense, James Mattis has said that, his Vice President Mike Pence has said that, but he has not. And so I would suggest that there is actually a continuing risk with President Trump on NATO, because as long as he does not explicitly endorse Article 5 and as long as he does not explicitly defend NATO's original mission, there is a systemic risk that he may not defend NATO if it is attacked by Russia or if there is a repeat of the aggression against Ukraine in the Baltics or another NATO member state. So I thought that there's been some moderation on his position on alliances in the first 85 days or so, thought the meeting with Stoltenberg went relatively well, but it still did not go nearly far enough, and there is a continuing worry that he regards the Russia component of NATO as obsolete and he's not as committed to it as his Cabinet are.

A second point, I think, that we learned in the last week was that the differences, the change in focus on Russia, is less than it appears. Before Secretary Tillerson went to Moscow, we were told Russia was furious at the Syrian strikes, and that Putin would

not meet Secretary Tillerson, that he would boycott his visit to Moscow and that Russia and the United States, according to some Russian commentators, were on the brink of conflict. But lo and behold, when Tillerson showed up to Moscow, Putin met with him. Not only did he meet with him for an hour and three-quarters, he actually met with him on time. Remember, this is a Russian president who kept John Kerry waiting for three hours when they first met officially in 2013, kept Angela Merkel waiting for over four hours. So the fact that he met with Tillerson on time, I think, and spent such a long time with him, reflected the fact that Russia is actually serious about a partnership with the Trump administration. They believe there can be a reset 2.0 of sorts, and we saw, for all of the differences aired at the meeting, the elements of that reset 2.0 being put into place. In what I thought was a rather astonishing move, they agreed to create joint envoys or joint committee to investigate the so-called irritants of the Obama administration in the U.S.-Russia relationship, which I thought placed way too much emphasis on the U.S. side of the equation, sort of suggesting that President Obama may be to blame for the difficulties in the relationship; and they talked about working on a variety of issues to build a partnership. And so this, I think, really—it didn't quite go so far as what President Trump promised in the campaign, of developing a full partnership with Putin, but it went some of the ways there and I think it will raise concern among European allies.

Finally, I think a week on from the Syria strikes, what we've learned is that this was a small shift, but only a very small change in Trump's position. He essentially is trying to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, but he is not making Assad part of the problem that needs to be solved in Syria. And they said Assad needs to go, but only

after ISIS is defeated, in part of an inclusive international negotiation that would include Russia.

So I think when we looked at the totality of the past week, what we see is some shifts on the Trump foreign policy side, but a continuation, really, of ambiguity about his commitment to NATO, about a continuing desire for partnership with Putin, and a small shift but a continuing focus on ISIS and general neutrality, or even tacit support for the Assad regime in the short term, in Syria. So that is, I think, where we are as we go in, a week after apparently astonishing reversals by President Trump. Thank you.

(Music)

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