

The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of NATO and the Rules of Relevance

Col. Todd Schmidt, PhD, U.S. Army

In February 1944, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces, began drafting an “Order of the Day” that would eventually initiate D-Day and the liberation of France. On 5 June 1944, he made some final edits and published it later that evening. The order was distributed to over 175,000 American and Allied troops preparing to launch the greatest armada in human history to commence the most expansive amphibious assault the world had ever seen on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 1944. Following World War II, a new world conflict immediately enveloped the globe—the Cold War.

To withstand the power, influence, and international machinations of the Soviet Union, on 4 April 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed. The NATO alliance and the U.S. mission to NATO existed then, as they do now, because they directly contribute to the security, prosperity, and liberty of Americans.¹ Article 5 of the treaty, the most renowned, stipulates that “an armed attack against one or more of them [the signatories] ... shall be considered an attack against them all.”² To be credible and of consequence to potential adversaries, Article 5 must be undergirded by the other less-renowned articles of the treaty and, most importantly, by the expressed support, national policy, and implementation of policy of the allied nations, especially the United States.

Caught in a paradoxical position of blessing and bane, the United States is the sine qua non element of the North Atlantic Treaty. It is a position and responsibility to which we ultimately expect and demand, yet ironically, one we may at times disdain. The legitimacy and



Col. Todd Schmidt, PhD, U.S. Army
Director, Army University Press

credibility of the North Atlantic Treaty rests on the shoulders of the United States and the U.S. military.

Yet, legitimacy and credibility may be eroding as the U.S. political system becomes increasingly polarized, politicians undermine the importance and imperative of NATO, and our collective U.S. society forgets the sacrifices our forebearers made in world wars past.

As I have previously written in *ARMY* magazine, U.S. allies are not preordained and should not be presumed.³ Our allies must be earned. As domestic political contests rage within our borders, are we also seeing a quiet erosion of America’s reputation as a trusted ally and champion of the free world? There is a “narrative competition” being fought globally, one in which our adversaries paint the United States as fragile, temperamental, unreliable, weak in resolve, and societally sick. If or as this narrative gains traction, U.S. adversaries increasingly exploit the fissures and fault lines that are

forming. Considering or endeavoring to isolate ourselves from this international contest is not an option.

For the U.S. Army, it is our responsibility to simultaneously remain apolitical while ensuring that we contribute to our national narrative “by being a lethal, competent, credible force and being recognized as such by key audiences among allies and partners, as well as adversaries.”⁴ This will be a tightrope upon which we must remain balanced as the national political environment becomes more brutal and public support for the military more brittle. To remain relevant and above a public, political fray fraught with fratricide, the Army must consider simple rules of relevance.

The first rule of relevance is that the United States must ensure that “would be” adversaries of NATO must be 100 percent certain that Article 5 is factually and determinedly backed by the full weight of the United States and its allies across all elements of national power. The second rule of relevance is that this fact must be credible and unassailable, backed by evidence of its invocation in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The invoking or threat of invocation of Article 5 should be a determining element influencing adversarial action. The attack by Russia on Ukraine has been and will continue to be debated as a failure of strategic deterrence, but by strict definition, strategic deterrence remains intact and the NATO Alliance deserves credit.

The relevance of the United States and NATO must also be undergirded by deliberately structured national policy. Policies and official government statements, or the statements of politicians and political candidates, that weaken U.S. alliances or call their credibility into question must be rejected. National, institutional, and bureaucratic policies that prevent and needlessly

burden allied cooperation, integration, and interoperability need to be revoked and rewritten. Policy, regulation, guidance, and instruction should empower and enable our alliances, not restrict and constrain.⁵

If you have not heard the idiom, “speed of relevance,” you may have been living under a rock since 2018, when Secretary of Defense James Mattis is credited with its coinage.⁶ Since then, it has been used countless times, particularly in our communities of national security, defense, and military professionals. Although the term cleverly communicates an imperative of information sharing and decision-making, its overuse has diluted its impact as a strategic message.

Regardless, the relevance of NATO remains certain and firm. On its borders and in the year ahead, NATO will continue to confront crisis, conflict, and collective self-questioning. For the U.S. Army, despite the domestic or international political debates and self-flagellation that may occur, military leaders must not forget the sacrifices marked in June 2024, the eightieth anniversary commemorating D-Day, or in May 2025, the commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of “Victory in Europe.”

Just as importantly, we must not forget that our NATO allies are growing in number, from the original twelve members to the current thirty-two members, because they trust and depend on U.S. leadership, credibility, and willingness to remain the sine qua non of the greatest alliance in the world. We commemorate and celebrate the anniversary of D-Day with two articles in this edition and will publish several articles commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of NATO in future issues of *Military Review* through the remainder of 2024. ■

Notes

1. “About NATO,” U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), accessed 29 March 2024, <https://nato.usmission.gov/about-nato/>.

2. “Collective Defense and Article 5,” NATO, last updated 4 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

3. Todd Schmidt, “Army Must Strengthen Its Relationships with Allies,” Association of the United States Army, 17 August 2021, <https://www.ausea.org/articles/army-must-strengthen-its-relationships-allies>.

4. James McConville, *The Army in Military Competition*, Chief of Staff Paper #2 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1 March 2021), v.

5. Schmidt, “Army Must Strengthen Its Relationships.”

6. James Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), 10.

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