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The Foreign Policy Blob's Desperate Attempt To Preserve NATO

There are multiple indications that members of the foreign policy establishment are increasingly worried that the American people are growing weary of Washington's strategic overextension and the excessive costs in treasure and blood that role imposes. Elites show their nervousness through desperate attempts to preserve the policy status quo. One recent example was the effort in Congress to limit the president's powers and options regarding NATO.

In December 2023, hawks finally achieved their goal when both the Senate and House approved a provision attached to the National Defense Authorization Act that would bar a president from withdrawing the U.S. from NATO without the approval of two-thirds of the Senate or separate legislation passed by both houses of Congress. *Washington Post* analyst Meagan Vasquez notes that "the bipartisan attempt to add checks and balances highlights the lengths Congress is willing to go to protect the U.S.-NATO relationship amid ongoing Russian aggression and after years of criticism of the military alliance during Trump's presidential tenure."

Yet even the Brookings Institution's Michael E. O'Hanlon, a prominent establishment foreign policy figure, concedes that Congress is entering uncharted and controversial territory. He points out "that there is precedent for presidents withdrawing unilaterally from treaties without consulting Congress. A chief executive conceivably could push back on efforts to restrict that [authority] particularly if the treaty addresses the United States' defense

posture abroad. A “future president might challenge such an effort and invoke the president’s authorities as commander in chief under Article 2 of the Constitution.”

O’Hanlon is probably correct. Indeed, a congressional-presidential collision is likely to take place even if critics of promiscuous military interventions do not attempt to end U.S. membership in NATO. Members of the “NATO forever” crowd will react badly even if a president committed to a more restrained foreign policy merely attempts to reduce the U.S. military footprint in Europe. Such a move would indicate a long overdue willingness on the part of an administration to move beyond burden sharing toward burden shifting with respect to transatlantic security policy.

Even a partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe would signal to the European members of NATO that going forward they would need to accept primary responsibility for their own defense and the continent’s security. NATO partisans would regard such a policy change as undermining continued U.S. dominance of the trans-Atlantic security relationship. That faction in Congress would almost certainly move to thwart a reformist administration.

U.S. hardliners already have demonstrated a determination to prevent any president from implementing a less interventionist policy elsewhere in the world. In October 2019, congressional hawks led by neo-conservative Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) secured a resolution [condemning President Donald Trump](#) for even considering a partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. Fears that Trump might remove U.S. forces from Europe during a second term have become [widespread](#) in Washington. Indeed, those worries on the part of America’s stodgy foreign policy elite were a major reason why Congress passed the new bi-partisan measure to prohibit the president from unilaterally exiting NATO.

It is notable that Congress has afforded presidents a great deal of latitude both with respect to the general handling of foreign policy and specifically in the use of U.S. forces on the world scene. Yet that restraint seems to apply only when a president is willing to continue Washington’s interventionist foreign policy. When merely a theoretical possibility of a less belligerent policy emerges, congressional hawks are prepared to severely restrict the president’s role as commander-and-chief of the military.

The controversy over whether the president has the authority to withdraw U.S. membership in NATO reflects a broader problem with U.S. foreign policy. The core feature of Washington’s long-standing insistence on U.S. global primacy is a NATO under permanent U.S. dominance. That determination has been evident for decades. Even when the Soviet Union disintegrated, there was vehement opposition from members of the foreign policy blob

to dissolving an alliance whose overriding purpose was to counter Soviet power in Europe. Clearly, that mission was no longer needed since the Soviet Union no longer existed. Instead of accepting and adjusting to that existential change, the blob's reaction was to find alternative missions for their sacred, but now obsolete, alliance. [Suggested new missions](#) even included promoting student exchanges and coordinating environmental policies, measures for which a military alliance is not needed. Worse, NATO enthusiasts sought to expand the alliance into Eastern Europe, thereby threatening non-Communist Russia's security zone. Such provocative actions [eventually poisoned](#) the West's relations with Moscow. [The war in Ukraine](#) and the resulting NATO-Russia confrontation is the alarming result.

The American people need to firmly rebuff the ongoing effort to make the current U.S. posture toward NATO permanent. A smart foreign policy must be agile and willing to adjust to important changes in the international system. The place to begin such badly needed policy reform is by rejecting the out-of-touch foreign policy establishment's escalating campaign to freeze NATO in place.

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