

NATO at 70

by GWYNNE DYER

When he took office in January 2017, Donald Trump called the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 'obsolete', but he hates all multinational institutions so that hardly counts. Just last month, however, France's President Emmanuel Macron said that the NATO alliance is 'strategically brain-dead,' which is closer to the truth.

Yet the leaders of the alliance's 29 member countries were all in the United Kingdom on Wednesday to celebrate the 70th anniversary of NATO's foundation. Brain-dead or just deeply confused, it continues to stumble around and receives frequent transfusions of cash. Why?

Macron was furious last month because nobody in NATO could satisfactorily answer his big question: 'WHO IS THE ENEMY??' The alleged Russian threat is still the glue that holds the alliance together, but Macron doesn't believe in that. His own answer is that the alliance's real enemy is terrorism, but that is equally silly.

Terrorism is a major nuisance but not an existential threat, and counter-terrorism is usually a secret 'war' in which armies have little importance. The appropriate tools for combating it are generally intelligence services and police forces, not armoured brigades.

Very rarely, as in the case of the recently defeated 'Islamic State' (ISIS), terrorists do control territory and can be fought openly. The recent behaviour of Turkey and the United States in northeastern Syria, however, shows the duplicity and cynicism with which those major NATO members now view the alliance.

President Trump agreed to let Turkey's strongman leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, invade Syria and attack the Syrian Kurds, who have been America's close allies for the past three years in the war against ISIS. He also implicitly consented to let Erdogan's forces ethnically cleanse the Syrian Kurds from their homes and settle several million Syrian Arab refugees in them instead.

Neither Trump nor Erdogan consulted with their NATO partners about these potential war crimes. Indeed, President Macron found out about it all in a Trump tweet, which explains his fury. But the other European members of NATO said little in public, because Erdogan was also threatening to dump a couple of million Syrian refugees on them instead if they complained.

So what useful purpose, if any, does NATO serve 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the enemy it was created to fight? NATO's member-states often try to revive the glory days by pretending that the Soviet Union has been reincarnated in Vladimir Putin's Russian Federation, but that's nonsense.

Russia has only half the population of the old Soviet Union, and its economy is about the same size as Italy's. It has no Eastern European allies any more: they all joined NATO (or are still in the queue) after their Communist governments fell in 1989. NATO's armed forces were twice as big as those of the Soviet bloc even in the Cold War, but they now outnumber Russia's four-to-one.

True, this advantage is somewhat diminished by the fact that NATO's military power is divided among 29 countries, and that two of the more important members, the United States and Canada, are on the far side of the Atlantic. But it is preposterous to plan on the basis that the Russian 'hordes' are itching to invade western Europe. Indeed, it always was.

The former 'satellite' countries of Eastern Europe are understandably anxious about the risk of another Russian take-over, and NATO offers them some reassurance. The only European countries that are actually vulnerable to Russian military intervention, however, are former parts of the Soviet Union itself like Ukraine and Georgia (what the Russians call the 'near abroad') - which is why NATO does not let them join.

The modest truth is that NATO is a familiar and comfortable club that lets the European members demonstrate their commitment not

to return to the devastating wars of the past. It gives Canada a safer, broader context in which to discuss security matters with its giant American neighbour. And it lets the United States pretend that it still leads the 'free world'.

The participants are mostly old pals and for the most part they just passed a pleasant day together. The alliance does not do much good but it does no real harm either. Let them have their day out.