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Obama Wants U.S. To Spend More On Europe's Defense: Europeans Should Pay Instead

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The U.S. plans on filling Eastern Europe with thousands of troops along with vehicles and weapons to equip an armored combat brigade. That will require a special budget request of \$3.4 billion for next year. Uncle Sam may be bankrupt, but nothing is too expensive for our pampered European allies, who enjoy greater wealth while spending far less on defense.

The U.S. plans on stationing up to 5,000 troops along with the prepositioned equipment, on top of 65,000 already deployed in Europe. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter opined: “We’re going to have to help countries to harden themselves against Russian influence ... and also mount—as we did in decades past—staunch defense of our NATO allies.” The Pentagon calls this the “European Reassurance Initiative.”

An unnamed administration official told the *New York Times*, that the step “fulfills promises we’ve made to NATO” and “also shows our commitment and resolve to individual countries to which we will be putting a persistent rotational presence of forces to demonstrate our resolve in their, and our, collective defense.” Moreover, said another anonymous aide, the administration sought to respond “in a more programmatic and consistent way” to the threat environment. “This is a longer-term response to a changed security environment in Europe. This reflects a new situation, where Russia has become a more difficult actor.”

However, the basic question remains unanswered: Why is the U.S. defending Europe? Doing so made sense at one moment in time: when the war-ravaged states of Western Europe were vulnerable to coercion if not aggression by the triumphant Red Army after it (more than the Western allies) defeated Nazi Germany. However, the need for America to play an overwhelming role disappeared as the continent recovered. With the end of the Cold War any theoretical justification for U.S. defense hegemony disappeared. The Soviet Union collapsed, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, the Eastern European nations raced westward. There was no more “there, there” to the threat of aggression from the east.

Today NATO involves collective defense, but for “their,” not “our,” defense. Although the Europeans sometimes join America in “out of area” activities, for which no alliance is necessary,

they have never come to, and are unlikely to ever come to, America's actual defense. Applying Article 5 after 9/11 was a nice act of solidarity, but European support was never necessary to strike al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban. The 14-plus year attempt to remake Afghanistan had nothing to do with any Western nation's defense. Libya was Europe's war fought with U.S. backing. Turmoil elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East also is a far greater problem for the continent.

Even so, there is no serious military threat to Europe. Libya's Muammar Gaddafi made a deal with the U.S. and Europe. The Taliban had limited ambitions. The Islamic State has limited capabilities. Russia may be "a more difficult actor," but it is not a suicidal aggressor. Moscow today is not the Moscow of the Soviet Union. It is much more like the Moscow (actually, St. Petersburg, then the capital) of the Russian Empire.

Vladimir Putin's Russia cares about border security. It wants to be respected and have its interests protected. It doesn't act precipitously, but it does act. And it will take advantage of circumstances. Moscow's treatment of Ukraine is instructive. Russia did little when Ukraine was ruled by the hostile, incompetent Viktor Yushchenko. The West supported the Orange Revolution which helped bring him to power and had high hopes for his presidency, which ended when he received less than 6% of the vote in his reelection bid. Russia acted after the West supported the ouster of a friendly president, who had won a relatively free election, along with a trade agreement to reorient Ukraine toward Europe.

That didn't justify Moscow's support for Ukrainian separatists, but it was far different than a Hitleresque Blitzkrieg across Ukraine. Indeed, Putin wanted to weaken rather than swallow his neighbor, which would be indigestible, as many Ukrainians would violently resist Russian control.

He's done nothing to suggest that he wants to rule over the small Baltic republics, which joined NATO at a time of greater Russian weakness. Grabbing a chunk of Poland would be as foolish as trying to annex Ukraine: Indeed, Joseph Stalin already moved both countries westward at the end of World War II to redraw boundary lines set by previous treaties and conflicts. And nothing suggests Moscow's slightest interest in challenging European nations further west—however competent the new Russian army, it won't be marching on Berlin, Paris, or Madrid.

Moreover, if this really is a "new situation" and "changed security environment," why don't the Europeans act like they believe that? The countries theoretically most at risk, the Europeans, continue to cut their military outlays and capabilities. As always, NATO stands for "North America and the Others."

According to the alliance's latest annual report, total NATO Europe expenditures went from \$275 billion in 2010 to \$253 billion last year. As percentage of GDP outlays have slipped from 1.64 to 1.43. The percentage of NATO Europe defense outlays that went to equipment fell from 20.5 to 19.7.

A majority of European countries have cut their spending. From 2010 to 2015, Albania is down. Belgium is down. Bulgaria is down. Croatia is down. Denmark is down. France is down. Greece

is down. Italy is (way) down. Lithuania is down. Netherlands is down. Portugal is down. Slovenia is down. Spain is down. United Kingdom is down.

In contrast, Estonia is up. Germany is up. Hungary is up. Latvia is up. Luxembourg (thank goodness!) is up. Norway is up. Poland is up. Romania is up. Slovak Republic is up. Turkey is up. All good, though Germany, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic didn't keep pace with inflation.

Overall, U.S. expenditures ran a bit more than 2.6 times those of Europe in 2010. The disparity had increased to almost 2.8 times in 2015. Although NATO aspires to devote 2% of its members' GDP to the military, NATO Europe managed just 1.43% overall. Only Estonia, Greece, Poland, and the United Kingdom hit the 2% level. Several of the alliance's most important members fell below even this mediocre average, including Belgium (.90), Germany (1.18), Italy (.95), Netherlands (1.16), and Spain (.89). As did Canada (1.00), the only other non-European alliance member.

On defense expenditures per capita the numbers are particularly striking. Last year the U.S. devoted \$1,865 per person to the military. NATO Europe spent \$446 per person. The highest European state was Norway, at \$1343. Next was Britain at \$851. At the bottom was Bulgaria at \$89. Several others barely broke the \$100 level. Netherlands was \$592, Germany \$521, Belgium \$407, Italy \$318, and Spain \$273.

Even as the administration proposes spending more, it won't do so honestly. It would use money from an account for fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Explained Todd Harrison of the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "It's a way to get around the budget caps" imposed by Congress to limit federal spending. No wonder Washington is broke.

The Eastern Europeans are theoretically at the greatest risk but do not impress with their efforts. Admittedly, they tend to be less wealthy. Nevertheless, they put little effort into their defense. They are more likely to have increased spending, but not by much. Per capita defense expenditures for all but Estonia are under \$200. Moreover, last year Latvia devoted 1.06% of GDP to the military. Lithuania was 1.14%, Bulgaria 1.20%. and Romania 1.44%. Estonia was 2.04% and Poland was 2.18%, the first time both countries met the NATO standard.

Then there is spending on equipment, which the U.S. will be covering for Eastern Europe. Washington already devotes a larger share of its military outlays (26%) to equipment than any European nation except Poland, which dramatically increased its share last year over 2014, and Luxembourg, which doesn't spend much overall. Turkey and France came close. Bulgaria is 3.2%, Estonia is 12.8%, Latvia is 10.3%, Lithuania is 20.1%, and Romania is 14.6%.

But don't worry. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proudly announced that "Over the last year, we have started to move in the right direction." Why, "after many years of substantial reductions in defense spending, the cuts have now practically stopped among European Allies and Canada." In his annual report he explained that 2015 saw "the greatest strengthening of NATO's collective defense since the Cold War." The situation sounded almost rosy: "Five Allies now meet our guideline on spending 2% of GDP or more on defense. Sixteen Allies spent more

on defense in real terms in 2015 than they did in 2014. Of those, 12 increased defense spending as a percent of GDP.”

True, he acknowledged, “This has taken a lot of effort.” Moreover, he added, “we need to do more.”

Yes, “we” do. These increases come on a very low base. Noted Olivier de France for the Paris-based Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, “Defense expenditure has been shrinking in Europe for the best part of two decades, and public spending has fallen sharply with the onset of the financial crisis in 2008.” The Europeans spent years digging a very deep hole.

Adjusted for inflation, NATO alliance outlays last year still dropped slightly. The two largest, most important, and most active European military powers, France and the United Kingdom, reduced outlays in real terms. So did Belgium, Italy, and Norway, among the larger contributors. Several countries which upped outlays nevertheless failed to even restore 2013 levels: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia,

The result certainly is better than continued big reductions. But no one expects an alliance-wide build-up. The only nations which increased outlays by at least 5% were smaller states in the east—Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece (more to confront Turkey than Russia), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and the Slovak Republic. None of the major powers, including Turkey, which courted war with Moscow by recklessly downing a Russian plane over Syria, funded a meaningful increase. If the Europeans really believe Russia poses a serious military threat their performance remains pitiful.

Roman Kuzniar of the Institute of International Relations in Warsaw applauded the administration’s move, arguing: “It is clear that the European Union can no longer adequately respond to Russia’s demonstrations of power.” But that is demonstrably false. The other European nations simply have chosen not to act. The Europeans collectively have a larger economy and much bigger population than America. Their advantage over Russia is around ten to one and three and a half to one, respectively. Already Europe NATO outspends Russia about two to one on the military. The former could do much more. Radko Hokovsky of the Prague-based European Values said: “Europeans really need to step up their defense efforts so that they are not like a child always waiting for an American mom to come save them because they are so lazy to spend their wealth on their own security.”

U.S. expenditures are down as well, but mainly because the U.S. no longer is so intensely fighting so many wars. The Obama administration is merely reducing the massive Bush build-up. And as a percentage of GDP America’s outlays are more than double those of the Europeans. Equipment expenditures as a percent of total military outlays remain well above European levels. Although the U.S. faces even fewer serious military threats, including from Russia, than does Europe.

World War II ended more than seven decades ago. If the Europeans feel endangered, they should take action. It is not the responsibility of Americans to do more. After all, the U.S. is very busy in the world. It is doing most of the fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. It is defending Japan and South Korea. It is confronting China over the South China Seas. It is patrolling the seas.

Moreover, Washington cannot afford to spend more on the military. The U.S. government is effectively bankrupt. The Congressional Budget Office recently warned that deficits will start rising again this year. By 2026 the red ink will be \$1.37 trillion. The cumulative deficit over the next decade will be \$9.4 trillion. Promised benefits for the future for which there is no money are an even bigger problem. By one estimate the U.S. has some \$200 trillion in unfunded liabilities. Washington no longer can afford to garrison the globe.

The world is changing. So should America's national security priorities. Europe should take over its own defense.

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