



President Shouldn't Reassure Europe

He should tell the Eurowimps to defend themselves.

By Doug Bandow – 6.3.14

It was inevitable. The president is going to Europe. He plans to “soothe European friends,” declared the *New York Times*. He “aims to stress U.S. commitment” to the continent, said the *Washington Post*.

That's certainly what the Europeans want to hear. Former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski said: “We will have a difficult time getting through the next four or five months without very clear and very determined American leadership.” Naturally, that means “something concrete” rather than just “empty words,” explained Bohdan Szklarski of the University of Warsaw.

For most Europeans, especially in the east, action means the U.S. putting more boots on the ground. Opined Heather Conley of the Center for Strategic and International Studies: “They need the physical reassurance.” Reinforcement of the eastern border is required, “and potentially we'll have to reinforce it for a very long time.”

Why?

Yes, Estonia is quaking with fear over potential Russian aggression. Tallin devotes two percent of its GDP to defense.

Latvia is worried about Moscow's intentions in the aftermath of the latter's annexation of Crimea. Riga spends .9 percent of its GDP on the military.

Lithuania also has a large ethnic Russian population and is on guard against potential provocations by Vladimir Putin. Vilnius commits .8 percent of its GDP on defense.

Poland may be the country most insistent about the necessity of American troops along its border with Russia. To its credit, Poland has been increasing military outlays, but it still falls short of NATO's two percent objective. Warsaw spent 1.8 percent last year.

Only Great Britain and Greece joined Estonia in hitting the two percent benchmark, and Greece did so more in response to fellow NATO member Turkey than to Russia. France and Turkey fall short. Germany comes in at 1.3 percent. Italy is at 1.2 percent. Overall NATO hit 1.6 percent last year. America was 4.1 percent.

Per capita military spending is even more striking. My Cato Institute colleague Chris Preble figured that to be \$1,896 for Americans. And \$399 for Europeans. A disparity of nearly five to one.

In fact, the Ukraine crisis in part reflects Kiev's decrepit military. Ukraine devoted less than one percent of GDP to defense, and obviously didn't spend that limited amount of money well. Although the country wouldn't ever have had much hope of defeating Russia in a full-scale war, a more potent military could have deterred Moscow by threatening to inflict significant pain. Instead, Kiev has had trouble combatting irregular separatists.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama doesn't appear to recognize the dependency problem. True, at West Point he called on America's European allies to "pull their weight to counter-terrorism." But within Europe he merely indicated that "we are now working with NATO allies" to reassure the Eastern Europeans. However, who's "we"?

Poland expects to hit 1.95 percent of GDP this year. Latvia and Lithuania promised to up outlays to meet the two percent standard — in a few years. No one else is talking about big spending increases. There is no discussion of concerted European rearmament. Absent are proposals to move British, French, German, Italian, and Spanish troops to NATO's eastern borders.

And there won't be any as long as Washington uses the defense budget as a form of international welfare. The more the president "reassures" U.S. allies, the less likely they are to do anything serious on behalf of their own defense.

In fact, the administration has been sending the wrong message throughout the Ukrainian crisis. In early March the administration began taking what Secretary of State John Kerry termed "concrete steps to reassure our NATO allies." This typically meant deploying officials and occasionally weapons.

For instance, the media reported that Vice President Joe Biden "swept into Poland and the Baltic nations ... with a message of reassurance." He was "in Europe to reassure U.S. allies over Russia's moves in Ukraine." (The thought that Biden's presence would reassure anyone is more than a little disturbing!)

The U.S. also sent aircraft "to reassure NATO partners that border Russia." Moreover, a "U.S. destroyer [was] headed to Black Sea to reassure allies." Gen. Philip Breedlove explained that the new policies would remain throughout the year "to assure our allies of our complete commitment." These efforts apparently worked. In April the *Washington Post* proclaimed: "NATO Reassurances Ease Fears in Baltics."

Alas, the impact since appears to have faded. So the president has gone back to Europe to try again.

Instead, Washington should unsettle its friends and allies. It should end the cheap ride that it continues to give Europe. It is bad enough that Americans are forced to subsidize the defense of a continent with a GDP and population greater than America's. It is even more ridiculous that

U.S. officials feel the need to constantly reaffirm their promise to forever subsidize the defense of a continent with a GDP and population greater than America's.

The U.S. government's chief responsibility is to protect America — its people, territory, constitutional liberties, and prosperity. On rare occasions that requires defending allied states, as during the Cold War. But alliances should serve American security objectives. Defense guarantees should not be distributed for the asking, like candy at Halloween.

It's not too late for President Obama to move U.S. foreign policy forward by telling the Europeans that Washington will be phasing out its security guarantees. There would still be many issues upon which the U.S. and Europe should cooperate. But America would focus on its own defense, maintaining a watchful wariness elsewhere, worried primarily about the rise of a potential hegemon which America's allies could not contain.

Such a policy would help soothe the American people, who pay the bills. Instead of reassuring other nations that they can remain permanent welfare dependents of the U.S., the president should reassure the American people that he will put their interests before those of countries reluctant to help themselves.

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