



NATO Continues Forever as ‘North America and the Others’

An Undesirable and Unsustainable Burden on America

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The Washington foreign policy community is in permanent uproar over Donald Trump. There is no greater sacred cow than American troop deployments. Whenever the president proposes the slightest change – bring home some military personnel from Afghanistan, South Korea, Syria, or Germany – what Ben Rhodes called the Blob explodes.

The hysteria surrounding the latter proposal was uniquely frenzied. If you listen to the rhetoric, you would imagine that removing a few thousand troops from Germany was inviting the barbarian Slavic Hordes led by Vlad the Conqueror to march across Europe to the Atlantic. A new Dark Age would descend upon Europe. The U.S. would be targeted next. This hysteria disguised as policy analysis would be comical if America’s overstretch at a time of endless budget deficits wasn’t so serious.

Originally the US used alliances to advance American security by meeting common threats. In World War II the US joined various countries, including, uncomfortably, the Soviet Union, to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Washington’s fundamental security objective was to prevent any one power from dominating Eurasia. Unfortunately, the destruction of the previous balance of power gave Moscow an opportunity to do what Adolf Hitler could not. Hence the creation of NATO, to safeguard European states which had avoided "liberation" by the Red Army.

That world is long gone.

When the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact dissolved, NATO officialdom scrambled to concoct a new *raison d’etre* for the alliance. Which is precisely what public choice economists would have predicted. Among the more hilarious suggestions were promoting student exchanges and fighting the drug war. At the time I suggested turning tanks into bookmobiles, shooting volumes to newly freed Eastern European peoples.

Then came "out-of-area" activities, which led to dubious campaigns with little connection to allied security: the illegal dismantlement of Serbia, which offered a precedent for Russian support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia; almost 20 years of unsuccessful nation-building in Afghanistan; and the disastrous destabilization of Libya. None of which make Europe more secure.

Alliance expansion also was justified to promote democratization in the former Soviet bloc, even though the European Union is better equipped for that purpose. Now NATO again is focusing on Russia, even though its Putin-era revival still leaves that country far short of the Soviet Union in terms of national power. No matter how much the world changes, the transatlantic alliance must continue, with Americans protecting the tragically, perpetually, permanently helpless Europeans.

Despite the inflated anti-Moscow logorrhea spewed forth from Washington, the Russian Federation does not threaten America. Nor is there cause for serious conflict: there is no ideological competition, no existential threat, no territorial conflict, no global "them or us" struggle. Moscow's chief objective is to force the West to treat Russia as a great power by taking the latter's interests into account. The US and Moscow are fundamentally at odds over Washington's determination to effectively apply the Monroe Doctrine globally: only America can intervene elsewhere, including in Europe and the Middle East, irrespective of the interests of any other nation, including Russia.

The latter also lacks the intention and capability to conquer Europe, let alone dominate Eurasia. Europeans have recovered from World War II, with the entire continent free and whole and far ahead of Moscow, much shrunken militarily, economically, and demographically from the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin is a malign actor, but the likelihood of Hitleresque aggression is about as likely as a Martian assault on earth.

No doubt, the Russian military could do substantial damage against NATO's eastern members, most plausibly the Baltics or Poland, but to what end? Moscow took what territory it wanted from the latter after World War II and has shown no desire to rule over a hostile Polish population, which would be indigestible. Conquering one or more Baltic states would yield few benefits – gaining some territory while wrecking the economy and driving away the population – even if successful.

However, such belligerence would generate huge costs, even if NATO did not respond with full-scale war. The Russian economy could not easily bear such a misadventure. Any American and European sentiment to accommodate Moscow would disappear. Russia would face comprehensive sanctions and economic isolation. China, which rails against outside interference in nations' internal affairs, could not easily stand with Moscow under such circumstances. If there was general war, Russia would lose. In the worst case, it would end up, along with much of America and Europe, as radioactive ruins.

Whatever Putin's evil designs, so far he has acted rationally and with restraint. Expansion of NATO and partition of Serbia violated allied commitments and ignored Russian interests. He used underlying ethnic and political conflicts to hobble both Georgia and Ukraine, which prevented them from entering the transatlantic alliance. And he guaranteed control of the Black Sea base of Sevastopol in what historically was part of Russia. Beyond that he has waged political combat against governments hostile to Moscow, which sanctioned his economy, targeted his friends, and armed his adversaries.

Russia's aggressive behavior, most notably in Ukraine, is against America's interests and not justified, but remains understandable: imagine the reaction in Washington if Moscow had

promoted a street putsch against the democratically elected, pro-Soviet president of Mexico, sought to reorient that nation's trade to Soviet allies in Latin America, and proposed NATO membership for both Mexico and Canada. American policymakers would be in an uproar, demanding action irrespective of democratic principles and international law. Legions of hawkish legislators and neoconservative analysts would be performing the Maori Haka in unison on Capitol Hill while chanting for war.

Still, some Europeans understandably are nervous about Russian intentions and would like insurance against unexpected Russian misbehavior. However, they could do far more on their own behalf. If they want NATO as a guarantee, they should cover the cost, rather than off-load it on America, which is burdened with manifold military commitments elsewhere. It turns out that the Europeans don't want to pay, or at least pay much, even for a U.S. guarantee.

Spending as a percentage of GDP is an imperfect measure, but it does signify a broad willingness to sacrifice something financially on behalf of defense. Among European countries Bulgaria is the surprise leader, at 3.25 percent. Then comes Greece at 2.28 percent, far more ready to fight Turkey than Russia. The United Kingdom and France are respectively a bit above and below two percent; they traditionally have maintained competent militaries to meet international contingencies involving their colonial heritage. Turkey, at 1.89 percent, worries about Greece, as well as the Middle East, Central Asia, and, now, even North Africa, all more than Moscow.

The remaining five countries at or slightly above two percent are in the east: the three Baltics, Poland, and Romania. They take great pride in hitting NATO's formal target, but that "success" actually undercuts their fearful prognostications of a Russian threat. If aggression is a serious possibility, they should spend a lot more on territorial defense. The point would not be to defeat Moscow, but to convince Russia that they would fight, raise the price of aggression, and slow down any advance, giving the rest of NATO more time to react. Surely independence is worth more than two cents on the dollar.

Concern about Russia falls dramatically elsewhere in the continent. For smaller members military expenditures often seem perfunctory, motivated by politics, not security. Europe's other large states are among the least willing to pay for defense. For instance, Germany is at 1.38 percent, Italy at 1.22 percent, and Spain at .92 percent. Few people in any of these countries fear war; polls find that many of them *oppose coming to the defense of their neighbors*. Their enthusiasm for spending on defense will only further decrease as they face the continuing economic calamity caused by COVID-19.

What Europeans spend obviously is up to them. Unless they expect the US to bail them out of any military difficulties. Despite a succession of American presidents, secretaries of state, and defense secretaries insisting, requesting, whining, and ultimately begging the Europeans to do more, the latter have little incentive to do so as long as Washington stations troops on the continent, undertakes "reassurance" and "deterrence" initiatives, and sends officials to tell member governments and their peoples that no matter how little they do, America will be there for them.

Europeans may have taken Trump slightly more seriously than previous presidents, but the continent's military outlays have increased only slowly, actually beginning their upward move after Russia's 2014 assault on Ukraine. Europeans adroitly used these marginal spending hikes to convince the president that he had won. Moreover, his appointees consistently undercut his message through their actions and rhetoric. Since he took office Washington has continued to fund special European initiatives and increased the US troop presence in Europe.

Despite the frenzied reaction in Washington against the administration's planned German withdrawal/redeployment, NATO's status quo is unacceptable and unsustainable. Grant that current plans reflect the president's personal pique. Nevertheless, years ago he ran ads complaining about European free riding. Which has only gotten worse as Europe has gotten richer. The claim by his critics that even a marginal change in NATO dispositions would end the world as we know it bears no relation to geopolitical reality.

Moreover, current allied decision-making ignores American interests in multiple ways. For instance, inducting military midjets without the slightest relation to US security – Montenegro and North Macedonia most recently – increases Washington's obligations without adding any corresponding benefits. Allies are treated like Facebook friends, with America's goal accumulating more minions than anyone else.

Deployments also are being bought and sold. For instance, Poland enticed the president to add troops there with an offer to contribute financially to base construction and call the new facility Fort Trump. This project will further reduce Warsaw's incentive to do more for its own defense. Moreover, putting American installations and bases along Russia's border will fuel antagonisms, no advantage in today's international environment. NATO already sits within 95 miles of St. Petersburg.

Poland may not be the last such case. The spectacle of checkbook deployments prompted Latvia to offer cash for its own US garrison. This process could turn Americans into mercenaries on the cheap, available for far less than Saudi Arabia pays, through mass weapons purchases, for its protection. Latvian Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks opined: "We are ready – and this is an official announcement – we are ready to invest to receive a certain amount of American troops on Latvian soil."

There already are about 1500 NATO personnel stationed in Latvia, but Pabriks and his colleagues want *Americans*, either on a permanent or rotating basis. Defense Secretary Mark Esper has not specifically commented on Pabriks' proposal but mentioned the possibility of rotating additional US forces through the Baltics. There is no benefit for Washington to do so for the same reasons that Poland's Ft. Trump is a bad deal.

Financial concerns also have motivated Germans seeking to leapfrog the Trump administration and lobby Congress to block the troop withdrawal. The premiers of Bavaria, Hesse, Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate wrote to leading American legislators arguing that US bases "form the backbone of the US presence in Europe and NATO's ability to act." They appealed to the lawmakers "to support us as we strive not to sever the bond of friendship but to strengthen it, and to secure the US presence in Germany and Europe in the future." Bavaria's

Marcus Soeder further complained that "this puts a burden on the German-American relationship."

Not coincidentally, all four states host American facilities, from which they derive substantial economic benefits. If suffering financially, however, they should seek aid from their own country, which is in far better fiscal shape than America.

Worse than a mercenary attachment, however, is the ideological commitment to confront Russia, irrespective of the danger. At Washington's behest, Georgia and Ukraine were promised membership at the Bucharest 2008 summit, despite substantial European disquiet. Although such opposition remains strong, whenever Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg visits Tbilisi and Kiev he encourages their membership aspirations. Outside organizations also promote their candidacy. Typical is the Heritage Foundation's Luke Coffey, who recently contended: "For both Georgia and Ukraine, the US must work with NATO allies to ensure both are kept on the path to eventual membership into the Alliance."

Yet bringing in either Georgia or Ukraine would be dangerous for America. Neither country ever was an American security interest, having been part of both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Their situations are unfortunate, and their conflicts with Moscow have unsettled Europe. But these factors do not justify extending an American defense guarantee. Unfortunately, they would bring into the alliance the prospect of confrontation and possibility of war with a nuclear-armed power. Yet it would be America – not Montenegro or Germany or the Baltics – that would be most responsible for and bear most of the risk of any conflict with Russia. As usual.

Finally, Washington must set priorities. The federal government entered 2020 expecting to run up a \$1 trillion deficit in good economic times. Because of COVID-19 the red ink could exceed more than \$4 trillion and will be even greater if Congress enacts another bail-out. Next year the deficit will be north of \$2 trillion. The enduring cost of the "coronavirus recession" – lost revenues and increased social welfare payments – could be as much as \$8 trillion over the coming decade. Even after the coronavirus impact fades the deficit will continue climbing as a result of a rapidly aging population.

The US will find it difficult to maintain a globally aggressive foreign policy while meeting domestic needs. Proposals to do more in Asia will necessarily increase pressure to shift resources from the Middle East and Europe. How many Americans will support cutting social benefits in America in order to subsidize European governments that *have always favored and will always favor* generous welfare programs over defense? Washington's coming fiscal bust will eventually force Americans to ask why they must always pay more for their European "allies."

Washington is long overdue for a serious and wide-ranging foreign policy debate. This has yet to come from a president who, even when he glimpses the truth, usually goes about implementing policy arbitrarily and maladroitly. However, the frenzied opposition to the very idea of withdrawal from Europe demonstrates yet again the overwhelming power of inertia in US foreign policy. Even NATO, the Blob's most sacred totem, deserves a rethink.

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