



Instead of Reassuring Europeans, President Should Tell Them to Defend Themselves

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The president flew to Europe. He planned to “soothe European friends,” declared the New York Times. He aimed “to stress U.S. commitment” to the continent, said the Washington Post.

That’s certainly what the Europeans want to hear. But they want “something concrete” rather than just “empty words,” explained Bohdan Szklarski of the University of Warsaw. For most Europeans, especially in the east, that means the U.S. putting more boots on the ground. Opined Heather Conley of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, reinforcement of the eastern border is required, “and potentially we’ll have to reinforce it for a very long time.”

Why?

Estonia is quaking with fear over potential Russian aggression—and devotes just two percent of its GDP to defense.

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

Lithuania also is on guard against potential provocations by Vladimir Putin—and commits .8 percent of its GDP on defense.

Poland may be the country most insistent about the necessity of American troops on 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. 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 \$1896 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 money well. Kiev has had trouble combatting irregular separatists.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama doesn't appear to recognize the dependency problem. 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. "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. Absent is any commitment to move European troops to NATO's eastern borders.

Nothing will change 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."

For instance, the media reported that Vice President Joe Biden "swept into Poland and the Baltic nations ... with a message of reassurance." 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." In April the Washington Post proclaimed: "NATO Reassurances Ease Fears in Baltics."

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

Instead, Washington should unsettle its friends and allies. 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 constantly reaffirm their promise to forever subsidize the Europeans.

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.

President Obama should tell the Europeans that Washington will be phasing out its security guarantees. There will still be many issues upon which the U.S. and Europe should cooperate. But America will 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.

President Obama should stop reassuring other nations that they can remain permanent welfare dependents of the U.S. He should start reassuring the American people that he will put their interests before those of countries reluctant to help themselves.

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