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## Why “America First” Needs a European Union Military

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French President Emmanuel Macron recently proposed what a number of European leaders have advocated for over the years: a continental military. In the past, U.S. officials have reacted in horror to the idea. More recently, President Donald Trump called the proposal “very insulting,” and urged France and other European states to instead contribute more to NATO.

Previous administrations hated the idea because they wanted Washington to lead and the continent to follow. They hoped for a larger, more powerful transatlantic alliance. However, they were also willing to accept a weaker one so long as they got to make the important decisions.

As a candidate, however, Donald Trump took a different approach. He sharply criticized our allies for essentially leeching off of America. To him, money was the issue. He even threatened not to protect treaty allies that didn’t contribute more to their defenses, creating consternation in Washington as well as foreign capitals.

It didn’t take long, however, for Trump’s appointees to tame him. The president still rhetorically assaults his European allies—most recently insisting that “Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly!”—but his administration is spending more money and deploying more troops for Europe’s defense. Trump is even contemplating Poland’s proposal for a “Camp Trump” and permanent American garrison.

The fundamental problem is not that the president ineffectively pushes for burden sharing. His predecessors did the same thing: American presidents, secretaries of defense, and secretaries of state whined, demanded, complained, begged, threatened, insisted, and whimpered for years, *even decades*, only for Europeans to size up the global colossus across the pond and decided that it was a paper tiger. Washington would always spend more, irrespective of how little Europe did. So they responded accordingly, occasionally with small spending increases to limit the hectoring but more often with serious military cuts.

The latest transatlantic contretemps demonstrates that Trump was right the first time around and that this really does need to change. Burden sharing is a dead end. It embitters relations while

yielding minimal results. U.S. pressure cannot override domestic political imperatives, most importantly the fact that few Europeans fear attack and see no reason to divert funds from their generous welfare states to their nonessential militaries.

Washington's only hope of coercing the Europeans is to be willing to walk away from the alliance. It is time for burden shedding.

True, it seems obnoxious for the French president to suggest that Washington poses a threat akin to that from China and Russia. Said Emmanuel Macron this week, the continent needs a "true, European army" to defend itself from "China, Russia, and even the United States of America." However, that jab seems more rhetorical than substantive. Macron said he was referring to the threats to peace resulting from U.S. policies, such as repudiating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty.

In fact, Beijing poses no security threat to Europe. Although growing economically, the People's Republic of China remains a relatively poor country facing serious challenges. Its military is focused on deterring American intervention in its own neighborhood, not conquering distant lands.

Russia is closer geographically, but it still isn't that much more threatening. The European Union has thrice Russia's population and more than 10 times its GDP. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy individually all have larger economies. Of course, there is more to the Russian military than such abstract numbers, but no one seriously imagines a revived Red Army rolling to the Atlantic. Moscow couldn't easily swallow Ukraine, let alone Europe. Moreover, it is hard to imagine any benefit that would warrant Russia risking a catastrophic nuclear war.

America obviously poses no military threat to the continent, though Washington's imperiousness understandably grates on a proud nation like France. U.S. policies do more than undermine European security: they also interfere with European foreign policy objectives. The latest episode is Washington's demand that Europe abandon the nuclear deal with Iran, backed by the threat of sanctions on European businesses. Even though the continent is an independent economic force, it lacks geopolitical heft without its own military. It's hard to be a serious player when subcontracting one's defense to another, increasingly erratic and irresponsible government.

All this suggests that it is time for a "real European army," as Macron put it. After all, Macron explained, "When President Trump has to protect one of the states of the United States he doesn't ask France or Germany or another country to finance. That's why I do believe that we need more investments." Thus, "we need a Europe that defends itself better alone, without just depending on the United States."

However, the French president doesn't really believe that. He certainly doesn't want to give up his U.S. defense subsidy. Rather, he advocates for "much better burden sharing within NATO," which means no meaningful change from present policy.

European defense efforts are commonly measured against the alliance's 2 percent GDP military spending standard. The number is entirely arbitrary, but it at least sets a marker of some sort. Only the U.S. comes in well above that benchmark. The UK hits barely passes through statistical

legerdemain. Greece has done so in response to threats from Turkey, not Russia. France has one of the continent's two most effective militaries, but it still doesn't spend that much. Germany, Italy, and Spain lag far behind.

Even Poland and the Baltic States, which are at roughly 2 percent of GDP, are spending too little—if they are serious in their protestations about the alleged menace from Russia. Countries facing existential threats should spend far more to create territorial defenses. They don't need to defeat Russia but they do need to make aggression a bad bargain. Their failure to do more suggests that they do not take the threat as seriously as they claim or figure they can rely on the U.S. to handle any problems. The latter explains Poland's attempt to win a permanent American garrison.

What should Europe do militarily? That is the continent's decision or at least it should be. Europe's interests and perceptions are different than those of the U.S. But as long as Washington is doing most of the defending, it will try to do most of the deciding, including its allies' level of military outlays.

Some critics of a European defense suggest that Macron has nefarious objectives. Writer L. Todd Wood breathlessly attributed Macron's call for a European army to his "nebulous, globalist dream to further drain the nationalist blood from French citizens." If so, that's an issue for the French nation, not America.

More likely is the simpler explanation: Macron wants the continent, led by Paris, to assert itself independently in the world. He believes there is a threat from Russia, as well as "authoritarian powers that are re-emerging and re-arming on the frontiers of Europe."

In principle, there's nothing wrong with his objective. But it won't ever happen unless he is able to persuade people across the continent to spend enough to advance his grand ambitions. Europeans reluctant to fund their militaries today are not likely to contribute generously to fund troops for more peripheral purposes. Who is prepared to provide money for Macron's force on top of an extra contribution to NATO? His idea was endorsed by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, but her government last year spent a paltry 1.24 percent of GDP on defense.

President Trump should respond by adopting burden shedding as his policy. He should indicate that the U.S. plans to step back from its dominant military role in Europe. The Europeans could take over NATO, create their own organization, or adopt another approach. Washington and Brussels could then develop a new cooperative relationship, working together to confront common threats. That would offer a positive contrast to the present alliance, in which America has dragged Europe into an endless conflict in Afghanistan while Europe ensnared the U.S. in a messy civil war in Libya.

President Trump said he wanted to institute an America First foreign policy. President Macron has inadvertently pointed the way for that to happen. Trump should endorse and expand the French initiative, to the benefit of Americans and Europeans alike.

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