

‘Fort Trump’ in Poland: Why These Colors Won’t Fly

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Unique among recent presidents, Donald Trump recognizes, at least in his gut, that America’s aging alliances have turned into ends rather than means. He also understands that Washington’s supposed friends have enthusiastically taken advantage of our willingness to defend the entire world.

Yet virtually all his appointees are committed members of “The Blob,” the bipartisan foreign policy elite, whose members view the slightest reluctance to intervene abroad as shocking, even scandalous. They have diligently frustrated his oft-expressed wish to end America’s participation in such counterproductive conflicts as Afghanistan and Syria—and to force Europe to take responsibility for its own defense.

Despite European officials’ oft-expressed aggravation with Trump, they never stop insisting that Washington should do more on the continent’s behalf. So it is with Poland, which feels slighted since it does not host a permanent U.S. garrison, in contrast to Germany and many others.

With an eye to the president’s vanity, Warsaw has suggested the creation of a “Fort Trump.” The Poles would build a base—contributing a couple billion dollars or so—with the expectation that the Americans would come man it. Poland would gain a de facto direct U.S. security guarantee against Russia. And with U.S. troops on station, it could then cut back on military spending. As an added bonus, Americans would contribute generously to the local economy. All in all, it would be a sweet deal for Poland.

The ploy is transparent, but fits nicely with the Pentagon’s ambition to station military forces in as many nations as possible. Last week, Kathryn Wheelberger, acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, observed: “We’ve come forward with what we think is a very serious and robust offer and we’re just working out some of the technicalities.” The result, she hoped, would be “a solid foundation,” and predicted that a deal could be made within six months.

But what would America get out of this arrangement? The maneuver would not bolster U.S. security. Despite the bipartisan political campaign to treat Russia as a mortal enemy, Moscow is a declining power desperate to restore lost prestige and arrest the advance of allied arms westward. Russian President Vladimir Putin is many things, but there is no evidence that he is suicidal, the only circumstance under which he would attack America. Camp Trump would exacerbate Moscow’s hostility without purpose, reinforcing what many Russians already see as allied perfidy.

Years of expanding NATO have added plenty of American defense responsibilities without commensurate resources. The newest member, Montenegro, resembles the Duchy of Grand Fenwick in *The Mouse that Roared*. The Baltic States are attractive friends, but useless allies;

they brought potential conflicts with Russia into NATO for no gain. And they are difficult to defend effectively, at least without triggering a nuclear war. Estonia's Defense Minister Juri Luik recently admitted: "We Balts were very lucky to get into NATO when we got in in 2004. Nobody would take us today." Alas, the U.S. is now stuck with the job of protecting them—and the rest of Europe.

Nor would Fort Trump advantage the continent. Europe is no longer a war-torn wasteland dominated by a Red Army capable of rolling to the Atlantic as in 1945. Today the European states collectively enjoy a 10-to-one economic and three-to-one population advantage over Russia. And they are backed by Washington. Even Trump could not easily ignore NATO's explicit defense commitment. Nor is Putin likely to risk a catastrophic war for the dubious privilege of ruling over an antagonistic Polish population that has never taken foreign occupation well. Such a conflict would destroy his rule.

Establishing a Polish base would also discourage America's European defense dependents from doing more. Poland, certainly, and surrounding nations, probably, would do even less. Germany would see little reason to up its paltry financial commitment to its military. So too other leading European nations, which already prefer not to burden their populations amid economic difficulties.

That would be bad enough if the Europeans had been enthusiastically responding to Trump's demand that they do more. But overall, their defense increases, which actually began after Russia unleashed unconventional war on Ukraine, are modest. As a percentage of GDP, the continent's spending remains below where it was a decade ago. The trough was 1.4 percent in 2014 (when collective outlays actually fell) and 2015; last year it was 1.48 percent, a staggering .08 percent jump.

In 2018, just six European countries spent at least 2 percent of their GDPs on their militaries, the nominal NATO standard. That was only two more than in 2014. And the only nations among them substantially increasing their percentages were Latvia and Lithuania, small states that feel threatened by Moscow, and Luxembourg, which is the national equivalent of a colorful postage stamp.

Outlays by the five most economically significant European countries barely qualify as mediocre. The United Kingdom is slightly above 2 percent (through a bit of statistical legerdemain) and France is a little below. Germany spends an embarrassing 1.23 percent—its official commitment to essentially double spending over the next five years is a mix of both fantasy and lie. Italy barely breaks 1 percent and Spain doesn't even hit that pitiful level. However, perhaps most shameful of all is Poland, which last year devoted only 2.05 percent of its GDP to defense. Surely the independence from Russia that it claims to cherish is worth more than two cents on the dollar.

For years, in dealing with NATO, American administrations have demanded, begged, urged, insisted, whined, and threatened. But little has changed because U.S. behavior has never changed. Washington has insisted on defending the Europeans no matter how irresponsibly they behave. In fact, while thus abasing themselves, American officials have simultaneously promised America's never-ending commitment to Europe's security and created the European Reassurance Initiative, recently renamed the European Deterrence Initiative, to expand America's military presence in Eastern Europe.

This bizarre, counterproductive practice continued during the first two years of the Trump administration, as outlays, \$1 billion in 2014, grew to \$6.5 billion. Only now, with its fiscal year 2020 budget, has the administration proposed cutting EDI by about 10 percent. Pentagon Deputy Controller Elaine McCusker explained, “We’re also looking at increased burden-sharing.” She added, “We’re always looking for new ways to partner” with the Europeans.

No doubt the Europeans won’t be happy. Aaron Mehta of Defense News noted that “any cut will be unwelcome news for European nations who have looked to the EDI as hard proof that the Pentagon remains committed to its longstanding military relationships in Europe, despite sometimes heated rhetoric from the White House.” Seven decades of defending the continent and exhibiting infinite patience in the face of European cheap-riding obviously doesn’t count for much. Europe’s perspective is, what have you done for me lately? Naturally, McCusker downplayed the reduction, noting that the EDI “really has five lines of effort, and only one of those lines of effort is really decreasing.” Indeed, “It was more or less to be expected at this stage.”

And now, as the president finally cuts this subsidy program, he appears ready to create a major new one with Fort Trump. This is the definition of a mixed message.

Indeed, in early March, General Curtis Scaparrotti told Congress that more manpower and materiel were necessary to match growing Russian strength. Despite the president’s continuing call for Europe to do more, most of these resources will come from U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who recently reinforced the seemingly limitless U.S. commitment by inviting NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to address a Joint Session of Congress. She presumably hopes to embarrass the president, given his criticism of NATO, but Stoltenberg is a creature of America, not an independent actor. Without the U.S. military, the alliance would not exist. Washington should speak to him, not him to it.

There is much on which America and Europe should cooperate. But they should do so as equals. And that requires kicking the continent off the U.S. defense dole. The starting point should be to end any talk of Fort Trump. It is time for Europe to take responsibility for its own defense.

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