

Europe is Starting to Wake Up to Needing Defense— Including a Nuclear Deterrent

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The wailing is getting louder across Europe. Elites in Brussels and national capitals are clutching their pearls as they view American opinion polls. Their U.S. friends, the usual Masters of the Universe who dominate political and economic affairs, are reacting similarly.

Although the presidential election is more than six long months away and much can happen before November 5, they all are sharing nightmares featuring Donald Trump. Such is the consequence of spending the last eight decades treating Europe's protection as America's responsibility.

Europeans are only slowly waking up to reality. For instance, the British historian and journalist Max Hastings observed, "Some of us have repeatedly asserted that without America the Ukrainians could become toast. That proposition looks like it is being tested." He didn't blame America. Rather, he admitted that "there is also a realization that the United States has tired, probably forever, of leading and largely funding the defense of Europe."

Then he criticized *Europeans* for lagging despite their professed fears of Russian aggression. He wrote "The Germans have discovered a €25 billion shortfall in their defense spending plan, overlaid on national economic stagnation. President Macron is shipping 100 howitzers, but these cannot make good his earlier refusal to back Ukraine." That's not all; leading states such as Italy and Spain still can't be bothered.

Hastings was even tougher on his own nation, citing the ugly truth about its disappointing efforts: "Though successive British prime ministers have professed to embrace Ukraine, which is essentially our proxy in facing down Russian aggression, they have done almost nothing to sustain the supply of munitions, once the army's cupboard was emptied."

Indeed, he added, "since the end of the Cold War it has been the all-party fashion to treat defense not as a vital element in our polity but as an optional extra to the main business of government." He targeted the Conservative Party, the home of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher: "Since 2010 the Tories have refused to make the necessary defense spending commitments."

Also credit Hastings for admitting that the Europeans were warned about Russia's likely response to NATO expansion: "It was recklessly insouciant to take no steps to prepare ourselves, both morally and militarily, to fight if the Russians responded with force." He called for Europeans to step up: "Europe must send Kyiv yesterday every gun and shell it can purchase—we cannot manufacture the hardware ourselves in real time."

Finally, and most important, he acknowledged that the continent's residents must work hard to protect themselves: "If we wish to avoid having to fight another big war we must create a credible military deterrent in which nuclear weapons are the least relevant, though still necessary, component. Even granted the will, which is problematic, Europe requires a decade of enhanced spending to make itself remotely capable of self-defense, in the absence of the U.S."

Still, the situation is a bit less dire than Hastings suggests. He overestimates the danger facing Europe. Although Russia's Vladimir Putin is ruthless, the latter has shown little interest in conquest during his quarter century in power. Indeed, he began his presidency friendly to the U.S. and Europe; he was the first foreign leader to call George W. Bush after 9/11 and gave an accommodating address to the German Bundestag shortly thereafter.

Moreover, Putin's much-cited remark about the Soviet collapse did not suggest recreating the Russian empire, as commonly claimed. He declared,

Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.

Individual savings were depreciated, and old ideals destroyed. Many institutions were disbanded or reformed carelessly. Terrorist intervention and the Khasavyurt capitulation that followed damaged the country's integrity. Oligarchic groups—possessing absolute control over information channels—served exclusively their own corporate interests. Mass poverty began to be seen as the norm. And all this was happening against the backdrop of a dramatic economic downturn, unstable finances, and the paralysis of the social sphere.

Far from backing the return of the Soviet Communist Party, he contended that "the time that our young democracy...was precisely the period when the significant developments took place in Russia. Our society was generating not only the energy of self-preservation, but also the will for a new and free life." His discussion of how "to find our own path in order to build a democratic, free and just society and state" looks ironic in retrospect, but nothing in the speech suggested reconstituting the USSR.

Of course, his attitude hardened over time, but for obvious reasons reflected in his famous talk at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. He highlighted what faithless and dishonest allied officials subsequently sought to deny, Moscow's displeasure over NATO expansion and Washington's aggressive military policy. U.S. presidents, secretaries of defense, and secretaries of state knew that they were recklessly crossing a red line for Putin *and* most of Russia's top political leadership. For instance, in 2008 intelligence officer Fiona Hill, more recently with the Trump NSC, and U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns, currently CIA Director, warned the George W. Bush administration that NATO expansion was likely to spark a violent response.

Two years ago, Putin made the decision for war, for which he bears ultimate responsibility. Yet he is no Hitler. Russia has not found Ukraine easy to conquer. It would be difficult for Moscow to swallow its victim whole. Moreover, Putin acted out his explicit threats, not the West's

imagined fears. Never has Putin or the rest of the leadership shown interest in conquering the Baltic States, let alone more of Europe. The question would be, *To what end?* Putin's invasion of Ukraine was criminal, but he did so for reasons *known in the West for decades*. What would he gain from attempting to overrun the rest of Europe? When asked by Tucker Carlson if he might invade Poland, Putin replied, "Only in one case, if Poland attacks Russia. Why? Because we have no interest in Poland, Latvia, or anywhere else. Why would we do that? We simply don't have any interest."

Of course, Europeans should not trust Putin with their continent's peace and stability. However, *they*—not America—should make *their* security *their* priority.

An important issue raised by Hastings is whether Europe should develop a continental nuclear deterrent. The U.S. promised to use nukes to defend Europe during the Cold War and the Soviets never tested American resolve. Whether or not the continent was worth the risk to the U.S. then, it is not now. Observed the *Wall Street Journal's* Yaroslav Trofimov: "Would an American president, especially a re-elected Donald Trump, be willing to risk nuclear war for Helsinki, Tallinn or Warsaw? And if not, could Europe's own two nuclear powers—France and, to a lesser extent, the UK—provide enough deterrence of their own?"

Both Paris and London have nukes, but their forces are national and independent. Germans have begun to debate contributing to a European arsenal or developing their own. Even the Poles might be on board with a Eurobomb. Friendly proliferation has obvious drawbacks but may be the best practicable option. Today Russia relies on nuclear parity to make up for conventional inferiority compared to America. Europe could do the same vis-à-vis Moscow.

Nevertheless, as the Europeans move ahead, they also should seek a future in which they will be safer and more prosperous, which means reaching an understanding with Russia over a new security structure. Although European officials routinely demonize Putin, they share responsibility with him for the war. Fighting Moscow to the last Ukrainian is not the best means to establish long-term stability and peace.

Kiev's determination to battle on is understandable and, indeed, courageous, but Ukrainians should remember that the allies have consistently played them false. NATO made a commitment in 2008 that no European government and no subsequent US administration was prepared to keep. For 14 years, every alliance member along with the Brussels bureaucracy lied to Kiev, falsely insisting that they looked forward to Ukraine joining the alliance. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin continued the deception when he visited Kiev in late 2021 in the lead-up to Russia's invasion. At the same time, the Biden administration refused to negotiate with Moscow when a commitment not to include Ukraine might have kept the peace.

Shortly after Russia's invasion Washington and London apparently discouraged Kiev from negotiating with Moscow over the same issue, when the conflict might have been ended with relatively modest casualties and destruction. Moreover, NATO members continued to promise alliance membership to Kiev; at last July's NATO summit Austin said that he had "no doubt" Ukraine would join. Yet the allies steadfastly refuse to enter the war when their support is most needed.

A couple weeks ago Secretary of State Antony Blinken reassured Kiev, “We’re also here at NATO to talk about the summit that’s upcoming in the summer in Washington, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Alliance. Ukraine will become a member of NATO. Our purpose of the summit is to help build a bridge to that membership and to create a clear pathway for Ukraine moving forward.”

But no one expects a formal commitment this year or next; realistically, Kiev shouldn’t expect one this decade or next. Ultimately Ukrainians will have to make their own deal with Russia. And that will turn out better if done sooner rather than later.

It is Europe’s turn. Observed Hastings: “If Putin or China’s President Xi today demands: ‘How many divisions has Britain?’—or, for that matter, Europe—the truthful answer deserves the scorn it must inspire in both tyrants.” Europeans should act like grownups and take over responsibility for their own defense.

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