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Trump Is Blunt and Right About NATO

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They just can't take a joke. The former president Donald Trump made a sarcastic crack about encouraging Russia to attack NATO members that didn't invest in their defense, and hysteria enveloped both Washington and Brussels. For some officials, the imbroglio appeared to signal the end of Western civilization.

Even worse, Europeans realized that they might have to do more for themselves militarily. The continent's policymakers have begun thinking the unthinkable. Reported the *New York Times*, "European leaders were quietly discussing how they might prepare for a world in which America removes itself as the centerpiece of the 75-year-old alliance." What is the world coming to if European governments can no longer cheap-ride the U.S.? The horror!

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has spurred European governments to spend more. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said 18 of 31 members will meet the alliance's two percent of GDP standard this year, three times the number in 2016.

Trump's comment should accelerate this process, probably more than all the complaining, whining, and demanding of prior presidents combined. He claimed that the leader of an unidentified large European country asked if Trump would send in the American cavalry if that nation failed to meet its NATO obligations. Trump responded: "I said: 'You didn't pay? You're delinquent?'... 'No I would not protect you. In fact I would encourage them to do whatever they want. You gotta pay.'"

No serious person should take Trump's comments as a formal policy statement. Rather, it sounds like a witty riposte to a whiny Eurocrat seeking to justify his or her government's irresponsible refusal to fulfill a state's most fundamental duty, protecting its citizens. What American angered by decades of European cheap-riding did not secretly cheer Trump's statement, especially when a febrile gaggle of European officials responded by wailing that Uncle Sam might stop playing Uncle Sucker?

One of the more stunning admissions came from the usual unidentified source, in this case an anonymous European diplomat speaking to Fox News: "When Trump came along, it woke us up to the fact that the U.S. might not always act in European interest, especially if it goes against American interest." That was quite the admission, as the source granted: "It sounds naive saying it out loud, but that was the assumption a lot of people made."

Imagine! The problem is not that Europeans gloried in getting American officials to put Europe first—that is to be expected. Rather, the outrage is that *American officials* did so. And apparently did so routinely, without the slightest sense of shame. It took the undiplomatic, untutored, potty-mouthed Donald Trump to restore a sense of sanity to the U.S.–Europe relationship.

Treating the Pentagon as an international welfare agency for well-heeled clients is not the only problem with NATO today. Creating an alliance so heavily dependent on one nation encourages other states to fantasize at America’s expense. Their representatives often concoct grand military schemes for “NATO”—in practice meaning the U.S.

For instance, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, a medley of Baltic government officials proposed imposing a “no-fly zone” over the latter. To be effective, such a ban would require shooting down planes operating over Russia as well, leading to full-scale war. Yet neither individually nor collectively do Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania possess anything approaching an “air force.” Obviously, they wouldn’t be enforcing a no-fly zone.

More recently, Estonia’s President Alar Karis pushed for naval confrontation with Moscow: “Western countries should establish a military presence in part of the Black Sea to ensure the safe movement of commercial and humanitarian aid vessels.” Estonia, however, has precisely *six* boats, two for coastal combat and four for mining. They are backed by two planes and two helicopters—for transport. Evidently someone other than Tallinn would have to do the confronting.

Foreign commentators promote equally ambitious plans. Simon Tisdall, columnist for the United Kingdom’s *Guardian* newspaper, decided that the sword was, in fact, more powerful than the pen and wrote a column urging use of “NATO’s overwhelming power to decisively turn the military tide” in Ukraine. Yet the U.K. military is shrinking and isn’t likely to be turning “the military tide” in Europe or elsewhere.

Two weeks ago, Peter Bator, Slovakia’s Permanent Representative to NATO, came to the U.S. to complain to Americans that the alliance—meaning them, the Americans—had not intervened on behalf of Ukraine. Rather melodramatically, he imagined his grandchildren saying, “You were the most powerful military organization in the world and you decided not to militarily support Ukraine. Please explain this to me.” Tragically, he couldn’t. “I would have difficulties,” he admitted. He said he could “find many fine arguments” of a “theoretical rhetorical” nature but would “still have problems just explaining it to myself.” So off to war the transatlantic alliance should go!

Slovakia has only 17,950 people in the military and deploys just 30 main battle tanks, 60 artillery pieces, 19 combat aircraft, and 37 helicopters. Obviously, that doesn’t constitute “the most powerful military organization in the world.” Bator must be thinking of borrowing someone else’s armed forces “to militarily support Ukraine.” Probably not those of the Baltic states or London. I wonder whose?

It is one thing to be self-sacrificing and generous with one’s own life. Indeed, that’s just Biblical. Alas, that’s not what Bator expects. He is offering to sacrifice the lives *of others*—in this case,

Americans. If NATO ends up at war with Russia, we all know who would be doing the bulk of the fighting and dying—Americans. If the conflict were to go nuclear, we know whom the Russian ICBMs would be targeting—Americans again. As for Slovaks, Bator undoubtedly would lead them in praising the U.S. for remaining steadfast for all that is good and wonderful as its cities burn and people perish. After all, that is Washington's role in NATO, and he would probably express his satisfaction when talking to his grandchildren. What could be better than that?

It has long been evident to all that the transatlantic alliance is unbalanced. When it was created in 1949, even its proponents insisted that the U.S. would not provide a permanent garrison. Dwight D. Eisenhower declared, "We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason than that these are not, politically, our frontiers. What we must do is to assist these people [to] regain their confidence and get on their own military feet."

Unfortunately, the Americans stayed even as the Europeans recovered. And spent the last 75 years cheap-riding on the U.S. NATO officials are now celebrating that a majority of members, supposedly gravely threatened by Moscow, are finally devoting two cents on the Euro to their defense. Meanwhile, the expansion of NATO helped radicalize not just Vladimir Putin but the Russian public and was an important trigger for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. *Sixteen years ago*, Fiona Hill, who gained notoriety after serving with the Trump National Security Council, warned President George W. Bush that inducting Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was "a provocative move that would likely provoke pre-emptive Russian military action."

Perhaps most perversely, Washington has turned an alliance intended to augment U.S. security into an international dole. In recent years, NATO's expansion policy has been bizarre, including nations whose militaries amount to rounding errors. Even the latest additions, Finland, added last year, and potentially Sweden, which awaits approval from Hungary's parliament, are only minor powers despite their PR buildup. (What sets Helsinki apart is its outsize reserve.) Nor do they make America more secure. Rather, the U.S. has again expanded its responsibilities in confronting a major conventional military power which possesses nuclear weapons.

While NATO officials proudly boast about the alliance's capabilities, many of its members matter not at all. Consider the weakest links which, like Slovakia, sometimes harbor grandiose ambitions that only America can fulfill. Slovakia's armed forces, as mentioned, number 17,950. Allies with smaller militaries are Croatia, 16,700; Denmark, 15,400; Sweden, 14,600; North Macedonia, 8,000; Albania, 7,500; Estonia, 7,200; Latvia 6,600; Slovenia, 6,400; Montenegro, 2,350; Luxembourg, 410; Iceland, 0. In contrast, America has 1,359,600 men and women under arms.

This didn't matter so much at the start. No one imagined a Soviet invasion of the original military midgets, Denmark and Luxembourg. They were geographically incidental to defending countries with significant populations and industrial potential, then France and Italy, and later Germany. Iceland offered bases for the West best denied to Moscow under any circumstances.

In contrast, the recent defense dwarfs are concentrated in the Baltic and Balkans, neither of which is of security significance to America. The former is of minimal geographic concern and

difficult to defend. The latter still suffers from its toxic history of confrontation and conflict. *Europe* might believe either or both to be worth defending, despite the famed Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's observation that the latter "wasn't worth the life of a single Pomeranian grenadier." It is certainly not in America's interest to do so. And it is America's interest that should determine American military policy.

Europe deserves Trump's harsh words, but diplomacy is necessary to disentangle the U.S. from the continent. Washington shouldn't withdraw abruptly since its defense dependents have configured their militaries—that is, skimped on outlays and short-changed readiness for decades—in reliance on America's permanent presence. They need time to adjust. But not too much.

It is essential that the U.S. set a definite deadline for terminating its security guarantee. Subsidizing the indolent and privileged is bad for Europe as well as America. The Western allies should remain close and continue to cooperate on issues of common concern. However, the relationship should be among equals about issues important to all.

Donald Trump's limitations are obvious, but he understands Europe, its addiction to U.S. military welfare, and the resulting cost to this nation. President Joe Biden expects Americans to die for Europe. Trump believes Europeans should do the dying for their own countries. A serious foreign policy debate on this issue is long overdue.

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