

Forbes

Is Germany Serious About Defending Itself, Europe, And The West? Time For Europeans To Run NATO

Doug Bandow

March 2, 2017

In recent history no European nation has demonstrated greater military prowess than Germany. That competence had tragic consequences in World War II and colors Berlin's approach to the world today. However, more than seven decades after that horrendous conflict's end Germany should take on the defense responsibilities appropriate for a significant power.

For years American officials have urged, asked, and even begged the Europeans to spend more on their militaries. Six years ago Defense Secretary Bill Gates argued: "The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress, and in the American body politic writ large, to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources." But Europe's governments consistently refused, even during the Cold War when facing what Ronald Reagan called the "Evil Empire." Like the domestic welfare cheats of political lore, they consistently preferred dependency to work.

In fact, the Europeans long were *reducing* military expenditures. Only four of the European members currently spend at least two percent of GDP on the military, NATO's admittedly arbitrary standard. They include just one of the three Baltic nations which profess to be so concerned about potential Russian aggression. Only one of the largest states with the most proficient militaries, the United Kingdom, hits the mark, and only through statistical legerdemain. An independent analysis concluded that despite claims to the contrary, Poland, too, fell short, despite claims to the contrary, leaving only Estonia and Greece at two percent or above.

France lags as well. But Germany, further east and most closely connected to the nations bordering Russia, does even worse. Last year Berlin devoted 1.19 percent of GDP to the military. Either Germans are cheap-riding or believe they face no serious security threat. In either case, Americans shouldn't be expected to subsidize Germany's defense.

In fact, President Donald Trump and his officials have been pressing the issue. Defense Secretary James Mattis said "America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this alliance, each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defense." The president recently made much the same pitch: "We strongly

support NATO, we only ask that all NATO members make their full and proper financial contribution to the NATO alliance, which many of them have not been doing.”

Of course, that’s an unpopular argument to Europeans. They tend to dismiss this as a grubby preoccupation with money. First, if you just look at NATO costs—\$2.8 billion in common funding, for instance—the Europeans argue that they look better. Of that amount, Washington provides 22 percent, followed by Germany at 15 percent. But common funding is not force structure. NATO only has manpower and weapons to the extent that its members have manpower and weapons. Which for effectiveness means mostly the U.S.

Second, contend the Europeans, the relationship should be about trust and solidarity. Thus speak advocates of nations that deny trust and solidarity with the country they expect to defend their own. Cynics might point out how such an attitude is more than a little convenient. Why don’t the Europeans show trust and solidarity and promote America’s security?

The position of Germany is of particular note. It simultaneously bears the greatest historical responsibility for Europe’s current make-up, possesses the most abundant resources available to protect the continent, and has the most at stake in today’s European order. Berlin has spent the last seven decades atoning for its past. If Germany will not step up militarily, then who will? And if no one will, why should the U.S. continue to fill the gap?

A large German increase is necessary for Europe to come anywhere close to the extra \$100 billion sought from the continent. Some countries, such as Italy, continue to retrench, while others which are spending more are minor contributors. Noted Fabrice Pothier, a former NATO staffer at Rasmussen Global, “Now more than ever, \$100 billion is a long shot. Other important European players—such as Italy, Spain and the Netherlands—are either too small or too economically weak to have much of an effect on the European defense budget. In this scenario, Germany’s \$30 billion could make all the difference between a stronger Europe or a weaker one.”

Secretary Mattis apparently worried after his first meeting with German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen that the administration’s message was not clear. Noted *Der Spiegel’s* Konstantin von Hammerstein and Peter Mueller: “Mattis had opted for a polite formulation, saying diplomatically that there was a certain amount of ‘impatience’ in Washington regarding the German contribution to the Western alliance. In other words: It’s time to finally pay your share or things will get uncomfortable! It seemed as though von der Leyen had been lulled into complacency by the friendly atmosphere and hadn’t recognized the urgency of Mattis’ message.”

However, it now appears that the Trump administration has achieved what none of its predecessors could—a commitment from Berlin to meet the NATO two percent standard. Although German officials deny responding to Trump, the timing looks more than a little coincidental.

On Saturday Chancellor Angela Merkel told a campaign rally: “Obligations have to be fulfilled and others in the world will demand that of us, and I think they’re right that Germany must fulfill its obligations too.” She earlier told a party organization: “In the 21st Century, we won’t be

getting as much help as we got in the 20th. We need to greatly increase the Bundeswehr budget to get from 1.2 to two percent.”

Von der Leyen also has been pressing her government to do more. She admitted that other NATO members saw Germany was “doing so well economically” and described Washington’s demands for greater burden-sharing as “fair.” At the recent Munich Security Conference she admitted “yes, we know that we must bear a larger, fairer, share of the burden for trans-Atlantic security.” And she announced: “We Germans want to accept this challenge, and we want to accept it as Europeans.”

The Bundeswehr is planning to add 20,000 personnel by 2024 and take a more active role in NATO operations, such as deploying 450 troops in Lithuania. Moreover, Berlin recently inked agreements with France and the Netherlands to create joint fleets of transport and tanker planes, respectively. In January von der Leyen unveiled a \$135 billion procurement program through 2030. She said: “I am sure that this will find attention and recognition in Washington.”

However, Trump administration officials are likely more interested to see if Germany follows through with the Merkel government’s plans. Reaching two percent requires Germany to almost double its present outlays. Von der Leyen stated the obvious: “We’re moving in the right direction, but we can’t do it in one year.” Alas, it isn’t obvious that Germany can do it in seven years either.

Recent annual increases have been modest. Last year the rate was two percent, and in 2015 just 1.2 percent. The previous two years German military outlays shrank in real terms. This year is supposed to be a more impressive 6.8 percent, but that still will barely nudge German outlays to 1.22 percent of GDP. And observers doubt Berlin will sustain similar increases in the future.

Despite its past vaunted military experience, Germany faces many problems. The International Institute for Strategic Studies observed that “the Bundeswehr is already struggling with recruitment and retention” and the “German armed forces are struggling to improve their readiness levels in light of increasing demands on NATO’s eastern flank.” Moreover, “the budget cuts of previous years have led to a shortage of spare parts and maintenance problems.”

Despite Berlin’s assurances, many of Germany’s neighbors are skeptical. Explained Fabrice Pothier: “The Bundeswehr is underperforming and has a limited ability to deploy its own troops or those of its allies. Germany is one of the world’s leading defense manufacturers and exporters, but too much of its defense budget is apportioned to personnel spending. No wonder, then, that German pledges to increase spending are usually met in Paris with an ironic shrug that it will only serve to make German officer pensions more attractive.”

Moreover, upcoming elections might upend Germany’s pledge. Germany long has emphasized balanced budgets and resisted an active military role. Polls of public opinion are conflicting. In late 2015 the public favored expanding defense outlays by 56 to 30 percent. But in December another poll found two thirds of Germans opposed to spending more on the military.

When Merkel advocated increasing military outlays even she felt constrained to add that “the matters of development and crisis prevention are also important.” In fact, the government is divided, with control of the Foreign Ministry and other positions in the hands of the Social

Democratic Party, the junior member of the “grand coalition.” The SPD already has blocked some of Merkel’s defense initiatives, such as increased military sales to Saudi Arabia. Last June Sigmar Gabriel, SPD chairman, complained: “We’ve fallen back into a kind of logic I know from my youth, in which the only question being discussed is who has to spend more money to procure arms.” Other SPD officials have spoken of “NATO saber rattling.”

At the recent Munich Security Conference Gabriel, now also foreign minister and vice-chancellor, doubted the wisdom of going along with U.S. pressure, though he believed Berlin would have to spend more. Gabriel opined: “One has to ask whether it would really calm Germany’s neighbors if we turned into a big military power in Europe and ... spent over 60 billion euros [roughly \$63 billion] a year” on the military. He suggested that outlays for refugees was a preventative measure and should count as equivalent. An overemphasis on the military, he warned, “will not allow us to fight climate change, drought or poverty.” Indeed, “military intervention also taps funding that could be better spent in combatting hunger and misery.”

As for Chancellor Merkel’s promise to reach the two percent level by 2024, he tartly observed: “I don’t know where this money should come from.” Similarly, SPD Vice chairman Ralf Stegner said “Tanks instead of social security is a completely false debate.” The SPD’s parliamentary whip, Thomas Oppermann argued that “We should not make the mistake and trigger off a new arms race.” The SPD defense policy spokesman, Rainer Arnold, said simply that the two percent objective is “unrealistic.”

The betting is that attention on American demands will benefit the SPD in the election this fall. While anti-Americanism is not likely to play as well as it did in 2002 when Gerhard Schroeder essentially ran against the Bush administration and its myopic plan for war in Iraq, opposition to both increased military spending and compliance with U.S. demands could energize SPD voters. Merkel’s party has responded by promising to maintain social outlays, but has not yet answered Gabriel’s question about the source of the extra money for defense.

In fact, the most fundamental problem may be that many Germans perceive no threats to warrant more “defense” outlays. They aren’t consciously cheap-riding. They simply aren’t worried.

Merkel argued: “We have to spend more for our external security. The conflicts of this world are currently on Europe’s doorstep, massively so.” However, a bigger military doesn’t look like the answer to Germans’ greatest security concerns: refugee flows and terrorist attacks. And no one has suggested intervening in Syria’s civil war—that is routinely seen as America’s job.

As for Russia, few Germans appear to believe its brutish behavior toward Georgia and Ukraine portends an attack on Poland, let alone Germany. For all of the fretting in the Baltic States and tut-tutting elsewhere in Europe and America about Moscow’s actions, no one has provided any evidence that Vladimir Putin is mad enough to try to conquer Europe. What would Russia gain by triggering a potential nuclear war while attempting to swallow the continent backed by the U.S.? What evidence is there that the cynical authoritarian ruling in Moscow has morphed into a Slavic Adolf Hitler?

Which means Berlin's commitment to a substantial military build-up almost certainly will flag well before outlays reach the two percent level. Which would result in renewed pressure from Washington. And a potential bilateral confrontation.

Most Europeans seem similarly skeptical of the need for more military spending. Administration officials view Germany as key. Wrote Hammerstein and Mueller: "It is increasingly clear that things could soon become uncomfortable for Berlin. The Pentagon sees Germany as the most important country in Europe, the one that sets the tone on the Continent. If the Germans don't pay their share, U.S. defense officials believe, smaller European countries will follow suit, essentially hiding behind Berlin's coat tail. The pressure from Washington, in other words, is only going to grow in intensity."

And if Germany resists Secretary Mattis will be forced to confront his own red line: does he support America reducing its commitment to an alliance with those unwilling to do substantially more to protect themselves? Unless the majority of NATO's European members consistently spend a lot more on the military, a transatlantic showdown has only been deferred.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business groups. Bandow has been a regular commentator on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC. He holds a JD from Stanford University.