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## **Donald Trump Asks: Why Should America Defend Europeans Who Won't Defend Themselves?**

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Once again Donald Trump has shocked the foreign policy establishment and caused weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth around the world. He suggested that maybe the U.S. should no longer defend its prosperous, populous allies in Europe.

Disagreeing with Trump is easy. Often he's wrong, imagining that Americans are incapable of competing with other nations economically. Sometimes his argument is overwhelmed by specific insults and general incivility. Even when he's right, he's usually incapable of nuance.

In the case of NATO it's the latter. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization made sense when created in 1949. War-ravaged Western Europe faced an aggressive Soviet Union which had swallowed several Central and Eastern European states. The American defense shield allowed Washington's allies to recover and rebuild. Even then, however, Dwight Eisenhower warned against making U.S. force deployments permanent.

Alas, nearly seven decades later the alliance has become an end rather than a means. Europe recovered and nothing changed. The Cold War ended and nothing changed. The U.S. lost much of its economic dominance and nothing changed.

Washington continues to guarantee the security of its 27 (soon to be 28) NATO allies (as well as Japan, South Korea, and others). Yet only four European nations bother to devote even two percent of GDP to the military, barely half America's level—the United Kingdom (which fudges its figures), Greece (which worries mostly about fellow “ally” Turkey), Poland (which only recently fulfilled the standard), and Estonia (which spends little in absolute terms). The U.S. also is providing the bulk of the new forces being deployed: prepositioned equipment, thousand-member brigade for Poland, and armored brigade for Central Europe.

Yet among Europeans a feeling of entitlement reigns. Explained the AP's Vanessa Gera, “Polish leaders have sometimes lamented feeling like a second-class member given that there have so far never been NATO bases or significant troop numbers on its territory.” Polish Defense Minister

Antoni Macierewicz said gaining an allied garrison allows his country to become the kind of NATO member “that we have always very much wanted to be, one that the Poles have waited 70 years to be. We will be fully protected by a joint force.” Which, in practice, means from America.

Trump sees this as just a free-riding problem. He said he’d like to keep the alliance, but doesn’t know if it’s possible. “Many NATO nations are not making payments, are not making what they’re supposed to make,” he complained.” You’ve got to be prepared to walk away, he said. He “would prefer not to walk,” but if the Euro-wimps don’t “fulfill their obligations to us,” perhaps Washington shouldn’t defend them.

He apparently expects other states to do more than spend more. He wants them to pay America for its efforts: “If we cannot be properly reimbursed for the tremendous cost of our military protecting other countries,” then “I would be absolutely prepared to tell those countries, ‘Congratulations, you will be defending yourself’.”

A predictable firestorm erupted about America keeping its word and reassuring allies. U.S. officials rushed to calm the Europeans’ fears. “In good times and in bad, Europe can count on the United States,” declared President Barack Obama. White House press secretary Josh Earnest opined: “There should be no mistake or miscalculation made about this country’s commitment to the transatlantic alliance.”

The Clinton campaign claimed that both Ronald Reagan and Harry Truman “would be ashamed.” Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.) called Trump’s remarks “dangerous.” James Stavridis, former NATO commander and dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts, said Trump’s position was “deeply destabilizing.”

The Trump campaign appeared to retreat ever so slightly: aide Sam Clovis downplayed the candidate’s remarks: “We just want people to follow the rules. We’re putting a marker out there.” Trump told the *Washington Post*: NATO is a “good thing to have” and “I don’t want to pull it out.”

Failing to honor a commitment in the midst of a crisis would be, shall we say, bad form. It wouldn’t do much for American credibility and the value of treaties.

Moreover, Trump fundamentally misperceives the real problem. The issue is not burden-sharing, getting the Europeans to do more. It is burden-shedding, turning responsibility over to the Europeans. We should not keep the present military arrangement, irrespective of how much they spend on their armed forces. Whether European nations spend slightly above or below two percent of GDP on the military—the official NATO objective—is of little consequence. There no longer is any geopolitical justification for America to defend Europe.

At least the continent is important for the U.S. The Baltic States, which view themselves most at risk, are not. Washington should wish them well, but not risk nuclear war to protect nations without the slightest security value to America. And which, as former House Speaker Newt Gingrich put it, are essentially in “the suburbs of St. Petersburg.” Defense should not be confused with charity.

The only potential serious threat facing Europe is Russia, and even that fear is overblown. Vladimir Putin’s behavior is egregious, but nevertheless rational and controlled. He’s shown no interest in dominating or conquering distant territories peopled by non-ethnic Russians. That Moscow is theoretically capable of conquering the Baltics does not mean it would be in Moscow’s interest to do so. Military build-ups and maneuvers on both sides appear to be mostly political posturing, useful in justifying the opposing side’s build-ups and maneuvers. Trump was almost alone among presidential candidates to recognize that it is U.S. interest to accommodate rather than confront Russia.

In any case, Europe enjoys a population advantage approaching three-to-one and economic lead of nearly ten-to-one over Russia. Europe has a larger population and economy than America. Even today Europe spends two to three times as much as Russia on the military. The ever-hawkish Foreign Policy Initiative complained that Moscow has devoted \$700 billion over the last decade to military modernization—but that’s only a little more than America alone spends *every year* on the military.

Relative economic parity doesn’t mean America and Europe should share equal responsibility for protecting Europe. It means Europe should protect Europe.

Why should the U.S. maintain the status quo? For some, all that matters is preserving the alliance. Complained Ojars Kalnins, a Latvian parliamentarian: “This won’t be good for NATO unity.” Jens Stoltenberg, the former Norwegian prime minister who now serves as alliance secretary general, declared “Solidarity among allies is a key value for NATO.” But so what?

America gets a lot out of the alliance, argue representatives of the countries being defended. Stoltenberg claimed that “we defend one another,” pointing to European contributions in Afghanistan—far less than America’s role in that nation, and far less costly than bearing most of the burden in confronting nuclear-armed Russia.

The U.S. is interested in the continent’s security and stability, it is said. Of course, but the Europeans have an even greater interest. Yet they lack an incentive to act if America promises to take care of their problems. Moreover, there’s an even better case for the Europeans to subsidize America’s defense. After all, the continent is vitally interested in U.S. well-being, more so, frankly, than the other way around. Why don’t the well-heeled Europeans subsidize American security?

Washington uses bases in Europe for its misbegotten activities in the Middle East, contend some NATO enthusiasts. But America would be much more secure if it didn't intervene so promiscuously and disastrously. Anyway, it's possible to negotiate base access without promising to inaugurate nuclear war on behalf of the host country. Which could be the ultimate outcome of fulfilling NATO's Article 5 commitment.

U.S. officials should stop whining about European nations which won't fulfill their promises to do more. As long as Washington insists on defending its well-off friends, U.S. officials declare the commitment to Europe to be absolute, and American presidents jet off to "reassure" the Europeans, the latter would be stupid to spend more on the military.

As for Trump's complaints, increasing Europe's outlays would not suddenly make it in America's interest to defend that continent. Nor would any increase be sustainable. Most Europeans perceive little threat, and thus little justification, for additional military outlays.

Even if a few European governments responded to Trump by bumping up expenditures, there likely would be little long-run change. Both their fear and Washington's interest almost certainly would lag over time. Even President Trump would be unlikely to drop allies because their military spending per GDP dropped from 2.01 percent to 1.97 percent. The better policy would be to kick Europe off of America's defense dole.

No one should mistake Donald Trump as a great strategic thinker. But when it comes to foreign policy he exhibits more common sense than the usual gaggle of establishment politicians, starting with war-happy Hillary Clinton. NATO has outlived its usefulness. The U.S. should turn over defense responsibility for Europe to Europe. Starting today.

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