

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## **The U.S. NATO Alliance Has Been a One-Way Street for Too Long**

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February 21, 2017

Defense Secretary James Mattis made a splash on his visit to Europe. He ratcheted up Washington's traditional request for the Europeans to spend more on their defense. And his demand resonated across the continent, because his boss, President Donald Trump, has spent years denouncing Washington's feckless allies for leeching off America.

But some Europeans, when asked to do what normal countries do—take care of their own security—said no. In essence, declared European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, Europe was busy financing Third World development, so America should continue to face down nuclear-armed Russia on the continent's behalf. Such a deal!

President Trump should respond unequivocally. The United States won't tell Europeans how much to spend on the military, but henceforth they will be responsible for the consequences of their decision. Washington should develop a plan to gradually but completely shift responsibility for Europe's security back onto the Europeans, not simply collect a little extra cash for continuing to do their dirty work.

NATO has faced an existential crisis since the end of the Cold War. Created to contain and deter the Soviet Union, the American-led European alliance lost its *raison d'être* when the Soviet Union disappeared and the Warsaw Pact dissolved. In search of new roles, some alliance officials desperately suggested that the military alliance organize student exchanges and fight the drug war.

Instead, NATO supplanted the European Union in taking on the duty of welcoming the eastern European states into the Western world. The alliance acted like a social club that every respectable nation should want to join. Geopolitical nonentities, such as the Baltic states, Albania, Slovenia and Croatia, were added. Montenegro, the modern equivalent of the Duchy of Grand Fenwick from the novel *The Mouse that Roared*, is waiting for final U.S. approval. As a result, the traditional anti-Moscow military alliance expanded up to Russia's borders.

Moreover, NATO decided to take on "out-of-area" conflicts, making war in regions of no particular security importance to existing alliance members. Thus came the campaign to

dismember Serbia, a small Balkan country that did not attack or even threaten any NATO state; joining the United States in a fruitless, fifteen-plus-year nation-building exercise in Afghanistan; and stoking regional chaos by fostering regime change in Libya.

More recently the alliance considered admitting Georgia and Ukraine, both involved in violent disputes with Russia. Indeed, the Bush administration debated and thankfully rejected a proposal for direct military intervention in the Russo-Georgian War, begun by Tbilisi's shelling of Russian troops stationed in the separatist territory of South Ossetia. Moreover, after helping to provoke an international crisis by backing a street revolution against Ukraine's elected Moscow-friendly Yanukovich government, U.S. and European leaders considered proposals to offer direct military backing to Kiev. Again, cooler heads prevailed, though economic sanctions were imposed on Moscow.

In this new, broader approach, Washington abandoned even the pretense of NATO protecting the United States. Promiscuous expansion added countries with minimal capabilities irrelevant to America's defense. The inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine would not advance U.S. security, but instead act as security black holes, creating a risk of conflict with a nuclear-armed power that has far more at stake in their status.

The only good news is that, despite the rather frenzied fears of the Baltic countries, Moscow has demonstrated no interest in war. Rather, Russia appears to have regressed to a pre-1914 mindset, insisting on respect for its interests, especially its border security. Which explains its particular sensitivities over Georgia and Ukraine.

But the bigger question is why America continues to subsidize twenty-six European nations (Canada also is a member). At NATO's creation in 1949, Europe was only beginning to recover from the ravages of the worst war in human history. Germany, the most populous and industrialized country in Europe, was divided and not yet rehabilitated. The aggressive Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin had turned central and eastern European nations into satellites, establishing the famed "Iron Curtain" dividing the continent. Washington provided a military shield behind which Europe could revive and regroup.

Yet nearly seven decades later, the United States continues to subsidize the defense of a continent with a larger GDP and population than America. Despite having greater economic wealth, the Europeans spend less than half what the United States does on the military. Indeed, NATO acknowledges that Washington covers 72 percent of the alliance's combined military costs. Moreover, admitted an official organization publication, there is "an over-reliance by the Alliance as a whole on the United States for the provision of essential capabilities, including for instance, in regard to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; air-to-air refueling; ballistic missile defense; and airborne electronic warfare."

After years of reducing expenditures, Europe and Canada finally made a marginal increase in 2015. Last year, outlays rose an estimated 3.8 percent. Such a turnaround is welcome, but at that rate—worth \$10 billion in 2016—Europe will not close the gap with America in any reasonable time frame, even if the Trump administration doesn't accelerate U.S. outlays.

Moreover, if Russia really poses an existential threat to the continent, a 3.8 percent hike is ludicrously inadequate. Yet no one believes that European governments will engage in a sustained military buildup. Britain is embroiled in the potentially expensive process of leaving the European Union. Economic crisis is again building in Greece, threatening another continental convulsion. Michael Birnbaum of the *Washington Post* noted that elections in “France and Germany feature insurgent anti-establishment nationalists who, like Trump, question the need for international alliances.” Even more mainstream Europeans worry more about sustaining their welfare states and managing excessive debts than about Moscow.

Moreover, no European country bears an economic burden of the military similar to that of the United States. Last year only four European nations even hit 2 percent of GDP: Greece (primarily to confront historic enemy Turkey), the United Kingdom (by fudging the statistics), Estonia (a small nation on Russia’s border) and Poland (which only recently hit that level). While 2 percent is wholly arbitrary, it at least is a convenient benchmark. For a country facing serious, potentially dire security threats, 2 percent is a pretty cheap price to pay for defense.

Latvia and Lithuania, in a state of near hysteria over what they see as potential Russian aggression, hit only 1.45 percent and 1.49 percent, respectively. France, which along with the UK possesses Europe’s most capable armed forces, appropriated a disappointing 1.78 percent, and Germany, with the continent’s largest GDP, ran a pitiful 1.19 percent. Four European nations, along with Canada, didn’t even hit 1 percent. One of those was Spain, with the continent’s fifth-largest economy. Sir Adam Thomson warned that making 2 percent by 2024 would mean that “for the 13 Allies like Germany who spend 1.2% of GDP or less, defence budget increases every year from now to 2024 of more than 6% on top of GDP growth would be necessary.”

No wonder President Trump called NATO “obsolete” during the campaign. He talked about not acting on the Article 5 obligation to defend the Baltics unless they “have fulfilled their obligations to us.” That’s a bad way of doing things—treaty obligations should not be casually tossed aside—but his comment reflected well-founded frustration about the Europeans’ willingness to cheap ride on American taxpayers.

Since then, however, it appears that he has been kidnapped and replaced by a Europhile twin from an alternate universe. The president apparently has developed a strange new respect for the alliance. Said Trump, or his clone: “We strongly support NATO. We only ask that all of the NATO members make their full and proper financial contributions to the NATO alliance, which many of them have not been doing.”

Secretary Mattis actually was blunter, telling the Europeans, “Americans cannot care more for your children’s future security than you do.” He even added a threat: “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.”

Some European leaders were conciliatory. German defense minister Ursula von der Leyen said simply, “The U.S. is right.” She added, “We Germans want to accept his challenge, and we want to accept it as Europeans.” Dutch defense minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert also backed Mattis’ request for higher continental outlays.

Alliance secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg embraced Mattis's message, if not his tone: "This is not the U.S. telling Europe to increase defense spending. This is 28 allies, heads of state and government, sitting around the same table in 2014 and looking into each other's eyes and agreeing that we shall increase defense spending. So this is about implementing something, which 28 heads of state and government have agreed that we will do together."

Of course, that commitment wouldn't exist absent U.S. complaints. Moreover, some of last year's increases were tiny, while other governments reduced real outlays: Belgium, Canada, Greece, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. But at least most members started moving in the right direction.

Nevertheless, some Europeans defend their minimal commitment to their own defense. One, obviously reflecting public attitudes, is that the continent faces few, if any, serious security threats. "Old Europe," at least, is unlikely to find Russian tanks traversing local roads under any circumstances, and no other similarly dangerous scenarios are evident. So why spend more? That's a perfectly reasonable argument, but it leaves no reason for American military forces to stick around.

Some European defense officials contend that while they are poor on inputs, they do better on outputs: as a share of forces, the United States provides less than its 46 percent of total NATO GDP. That ignores relative capabilities of the militaries: American units are more able and deployable.

Moreover, Europe provides none of the funding for the defense of anything else, including America and Asia. Of course, Europeans may bridle at what they see as Washington's demand to back U.S. primacy and its uniquely global ambitions, but why should America do what the Europeans could do for themselves? No one else will protect the United States and Asia continues to grow in economic and strategic importance. If there is a case for an added American effort, it is to do what no one else will do, not to substitute for European capabilities.

However, most forthright was the European Commission's Juncker, who acknowledged to the Munich Security Conference that increased allied spending "has been the American message for many many years." However, he added: "I am very much against letting ourselves be pushed into this." After all, the Europeans do so much more elsewhere: "If you look at what Europe is doing in defense, plus development aid, plus humanitarian aid, the comparison with the United States looks rather different." Security involves more than just "raising defense spending."

Yes, and the Europeans spend more on their own social welfare and many other domestic purposes as well. None of this supplants the continent's responsibility for its own defense. The record of development aid is dubious, and often is used as an indirect subsidy for local exporters. It has very little to do with protecting the continent. Humanitarian assistance is a generous response to tragedy, but is no substitute to fielding capable armed forces. Providing international "aid" does not warrant Europe expecting America to sacrifice its own people and wealth, and risk war with a nuclear power, over continental rather than U.S. interests.

Still, there is no reason for the Europeans to spend more than they wish on the military, so long as they bear the consequences of doing so without complaint. If they don't believe they need to

respond—and few Europeans really appear to believe that the revived Red Army is about to make a dash across Europe to the Atlantic—then Washington shouldn't complain. But they shouldn't expect America to provide added military insurance.

Which is where President Trump has gone wrong. The problem is not that the Europeans spend too little. The problem is that the United States shouldn't be defending the continent irrespective of how much they spend. Thus, Washington's objective should be to return to Europe responsibility for its own defense, irrespective of how much European countries devote to armed forces. The fact that European military outlays are increasing merely makes the case that they are capable of safeguarding their own security.

Secretary Mattis got Europe's attention. Now President Trump should take the next step and begin discussions on turning NATO into a European-led and -funded defense organization. It is time to relieve Americans of their seemingly endless obligation to subsidize their prosperous and populous cousins across the Atlantic.

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