

# *The* American Conservative

## Europe Can Learn From Ukraine

*Ukraine has demonstrated how the Europeans can take on Russia, if necessary.*

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The U.S. and Europe in recent years have treated the Russian Federation as a significant military threat. With the collapse of Russia's northern front in Ukraine, Moscow, with the exception of its nuclear capabilities, looks less and less like the world's second-ranking military power. Europe had been cowering before what has turned out to be a shell of the once-vaunted Red Army.

The Cold War featured two superpowers. There were moments when nuclear war loomed on the horizon. That occasionally hot conflict ended forever when the Soviet Union, the "Evil Empire" in President Ronald Reagan's description, dissolved in 1991.

But Russia remained. A huge nation and energy giant, Russia slowly regained its strength under President Vladimir Putin, generating some of the fear once sparked by the USSR. Eastern Europeans constantly demanded U.S. support and troops.

The threat posed by Russia was evidently limited. Moscow gave no indication of having ambitions beyond its near neighbors, most importantly Ukraine. The prospect of a revived Red Army rolling westward was about as credible as the War of the Worlds or an extraterrestrial attack. Even the three small Baltic republics were unlikely targets, as the gain for Russia would be small compared to the cost of starting a war.

But the intentions of governments and officials, especially in other nations, are difficult to measure. It was widely believed that Moscow had the capability to launch a broad attack deep into Europe. Since the future was uncertain, NATO's responsibility was to defend its members—though in practice, this meant it was America's role to protect NATO's members.

Even when facing the Soviet Union, European NATO members worked overtime to pin their defense responsibilities on the U.S. As a result, Washington was the biggest military contributor to the continent, despite the presumed threat being an ocean away. Not only did America provide excessive financial support, but it also boosted NATO's combat effectiveness when the alliance attacked Serbia (which, notably, had not threatened the U.S. or any other alliance member).

A succession of American officials complained, begged, and postured about the unfairness of it all, but to no avail. Without consequence, the Europeans routinely made and broke promises to do more, preferring to instead spend generously on their welfare states. Even as those nations grew economically, they left the unpleasant job of defense to their long-suffering, credulous cousin across the pond.

Clinton Defense secretary Robert Gates noted how difficult it was for NATO to sustain even modest European-supported military missions, such as Libya, in a “neighborhood deemed to be in Europe’s vital interest.” Gates added that “while every alliance member voted for Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission. Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can’t. The military capabilities simply aren’t there.”

Even those that joined in were not ready to do so. He observed that the “mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country—yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the U.S., once more, to make up the difference.” This against *Muammar Gaddafi's army!* It turns out that many European allies were just about useless.

And then Gates issued a strong warning:

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 or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets. Indeed, if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed. Future U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.

Russia’s seizure of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas in 2014 spurred a small increase in military outlays by several member states. But the numbers remained disappointing. President Donald Trump excoriated the Europeans for their fecklessness and then took credit for increased expenditures—including those planned before his inauguration. Yet Trump’s own officials maintained Washington’s incoherent policies, subsidizing and reassuring the Europeans while kvetching about their irresponsible and selfish behavior. After four years, Europe was still proceeding at a snail's pace.

Indeed, the rate of real increase of European and Canadian NATO outlays slowed steadily from 2017 to 2020, only picking up modestly last year. The biggest jump since 2014 in relative spending came from Greece, though it did so to confront Turkey rather than Russia. (Greek GDP took a hit during the Eurocrisis, which ironically improved its spending ratio.) Of the five countries with the largest economies, only France and the United Kingdom hit NATO’s 2-percent-expenditure standard. Germany and Italy spent a miserly 1.53 and 1.41 percent, respectively. Spain barely bothered, spending about 1 percent on defense.

The border states of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, and Romania all reached 2 percent. But under the circumstances, that was inadequate. If they were convinced that they were under threat, they should have devoted more than 2 percent of their national expenditures to defense. They should have spent 5 or even 10 percent on their militaries, making clear to Russia that it would pay a high price for any act of aggression. National survival should top their priority list. Instead, they demanded the U.S. put forces on their ground.

President Joe Biden barely pretends he wants the Europeans to do more. Since February he has added some 20,000 American personnel to the continent. At June's Madrid NATO, members approved "plans to enhance NATO high-readiness forces to more than 300,000 troops, with forces pre-assigned to specific locations." It seemed like a great idea, except that no one had any idea where the people would come from. Who would train them? And who would pay to host them? Naturally, everyone will look to Uncle Sucker.

The good news is that defending Europe now looks a lot simpler. There is no longer fear that Russian troops will grab the Baltics, overrun Poland, march down Berlin's Unter den Linden, give France's Arc de Triomphe a Slavic makeover, and rampage onto the Atlantic. This possibility disappeared after the Russian Bear's blundering performance in Ukraine.

Three decades after the Soviet Union's collapse, Moscow has proved incapable of defeating even Ukraine on its own. The "Special Military Operation" looks increasingly catastrophic. Indeed, the Russian military has failed to protect earlier territorial gains made at great cost, and is in no position to brush aside Ukrainian forces, seize the capital of Kiev, and impose a pliable puppet regime as was originally planned.

This does not mean that an attack *on Russia* would be a cakewalk. Moscow's nuclear arsenal is a devastating deterrent. The country's vast expanse, though smaller than during the days of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, remains formidable. And the Russian military likely would tenaciously defend its homeland with the Russian people's support.

But if Moscow launches another aggressive war against a neighboring people without a plausible justification? Bad idea.

This offers the right model for Europe's protection moving forward. The Europeans should treat their defense as, first and foremost, their job. The European countries are prosperous and populous. Their peoples have the means to protect themselves. And they certainly have an interest in doing so.

Border states should develop tough territorial defenses that would make any attacker pay. They should put more men and women into uniform, then add the newest and best weapons. The larger, wealthier nations to the west should help train active and reserve forces of the most vulnerable states. Those larger nations also should act as armories for the nations under threat, holding stockpiles of weapons out of Russia's reach to distribute if conflict erupts.

Ukraine has the advantage of size, and can retreat as part of its defense. So does Europe, if countries cooperate with one another. In the event of a conflict, ground forces could pull back into other NATO members' territories to regroup with allied troops. Even at the initial stage of conflict, longer-range weapons could be used to stymie the invaders. If Moscow knew that an attack even on the Baltic states would be no cakewalk, the odds of the Russian government doing so would approach zero.

The U.S. could act in a similar support role. It would not be directly involved in combat, nor would it act as Europe's first line of defense; NATO's European members have the wherewithal to protect themselves. Those nations are wealthier and populous than Russia and don't need America to defend them. But Washington could help ensure that the Europeans are as ready as possible for any contingency, making an almost endless supply of weapons available if serious conflict broke out.

Ukraine has scored a stunning success against an apparently over-confident, under-prepared, and ill-motivated foe. Moscow's best option is to halt its invasion. Unfortunately, that seems unlikely as long as Putin is president. His political future depends on the outcome of the war. But if he fell, his replacement might be worse, an even-tougher nationalist willing to go where Putin did not.

However the Russo-Ukraine war is resolved, it should prompt a reevaluation of European defense. Shifting responsibility for the continent's defense to the people of Europe is long overdue. Ukraine has demonstrated how the Europeans can take on Russia, if necessary. Washington should turn that responsibility over to them.

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