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If Europe Wants To Defend Ukraine, It Should

Why are we "burden sharing" defense for countries that won't even defend their European neighbors when asked?

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The latest foreign policy crisis du jour is Ukraine. Next week, U.S. and Russian officials will be meeting over Moscow's latest threats against the country. Naturally, Kyiv wants someone to defend it, and equally naturally the Europeans believe that someone should be America.

Indeed, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss hired a Beatles tribute band as part of her campaign to entangle Washington in the Ukrainian imbroglio. If the Europeans had their way, the U.S. military would be on speed dial, ever ready to handle the slightest disturbance in their delicate world.

It is a ridiculous spectacle, the Europeans wailing and caterwauling for Washington's assistance nearly 80 years after the end of the Second World War. The European states possess more than 11 times the GDP and three times the population of Russia. What are the economic numbers using purchasing power parity? Then Europe has "only" about five times the GDP. Even today, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy alone spend more than three times as much as Russia on the military.

So why are the European states so totally useless when it comes to Europe's defense, so hopelessly reliant on America? Have they no shame? Hah, hah, the answer obviously is no! They will do, or, in this case, not do, almost anything to save a few Euros. Thus, the Hudson Institute's William Schneider advocated for Washington (of course!) to "act urgently to protect the states on the front line and restore deterrence in Europe."

Schneider's argument raises two important questions. First, what evidence is there that deterrence is not effective? Vladimir Putin, aka the reincarnation of Joseph Stalin/Adolf Hitler/Genghis Khan/Fill-in-the-blank monster and aggressor, has not attacked one NATO member despite more than two decades in power. He has not threatened to attack one NATO member. He has not maneuvered to attack one NATO member. He has not hinted that he plans to or even wants to attack one NATO member. So what is the evidence that deterrence has failed? None.

That doesn't mean he is a nice guy. Indeed, he has behaved badly toward Georgia and Ukraine. However, that has nothing to do with inadequate deterrence, since neither is a member of the transatlantic alliance. President Joe Biden noted: "We have a moral obligation and a legal obligation to our NATO allies if they were to attack under Article 5, it's a sacred obligation. That obligation does not extend to...Ukraine."

So what is the purpose of America acting “to protect the states on the front line”? NATO’s deterrence seems fine. Increasing alliance deterrence won’t have any impact on Tbilisi’s and Kyiv’s security.

Nevertheless, Schneider declared that “the frontline states, especially Poland and the Black Sea littoral states of Romania and Bulgaria, must be protected and will need a modern surveillance and reconnaissance system linked to an integrated command-and-control network.” Moreover, he added: “NATO should provide the frontline states with modern military capabilities. This modernization needs to go beyond Poland’s acquisition of F-35 aircraft and M1 Abrams tanks. NATO frontline allies need to be integrated into an effective deterrent.”

Sensible advice, perhaps, but why should this be America’s obligation? Is there nothing the helpless Euro-wimps can do without U.S. assistance? Why don’t the wealthier Europeans equip their brothers and sisters? Michael Shurkin of Shurbros Global Strategies pointed out that “It’s all a question of spending, with most NATO countries spending well below the notional 2 percent goal, and a question of coordinating what they do spend.”

Indeed, even after promising to increase their outlays and spend more effectively, most European states lag, especially Germany, Italy, and Spain. Of the frontline states, the Baltics, Poland, and Bulgaria hit the 2 percent mark, but that is not impressive if they really fear invasion. Surely their independence and freedom is worth more than a couple cents on the Euro. With its homeland essentially invulnerable, the U.S. devotes more effort to defend virtually *everyone else* on earth. Why are Americans supposed to arm European governments which don’t take their own security seriously—as well as protect Asian states and both defend and transform Middle Eastern nations?

If the Europeans care about themselves, let alone NATO-wannabes such as Kyiv, they should do more. Shurkin cited two tasks: “One is mastering the kind of sub-threshold indirect and hybrid warfare at which the Russians currently have an edge. The other is being able to measure out conventional capabilities. Europe needs both, for both would give it options. It has neither.”

Spending more for each other should be a no-brainer. Indeed, the Europeans, at least those constantly seeking subsidies from Brussels, talk much about “solidarity.” All for one, one for all, that sort of thing. Countries such as Italy and Spain have been especially high on the concept when it comes to Germany paying their bills. Solidarity is one reason Europeans typically believe their continent is superior to the U.S. However, that shared commitment is notably absent when it comes to military defense.

The Pew Research Center found that most Europeans were not willing to help their neighbors defend against foreign threats. For instance, just a third of Germans wanted to join with other Europeans militarily. The number was an astounding 25 percent for Greece and Italy. In every case, however, more Europeans believed that *Washington would intervene to save them* than favored helping their neighbors. So much for European “solidarity.” Rather, they are playing Uncle Sam for a sucker.

At least joint spending projects should be possible. However, Europe is even failing there. The latest European Defence Agency assessment reported:

Defense investments and defense equipment procurement, spending for collaborative projects does not seem to be a priority for the majority of [member states]. In 2020, MS spent €4.1 billion

on European collaborative equipment procurement... This corresponds to a decrease by 13% over 2019 and forms the third lowest value recorded by EDA since 2005. As a result, MS fall collectively short of achieving the benchmark of spending 35% of their total defense equipment procurement in cooperation with other EU MS, which is also a commitment under [the Permanent Structured Cooperation initiative]. In 2020, MS only conducted 11% of their total equipment procurement in a European framework. Since 2016, the share allocated to European collaborative equipment procurement has been decreasing continuously, reaching a new lowest level in 2020.

Although Europeans want to be defended, it is evident that they would prefer not to have to do the defending—or the spending. No wonder they figure Ukraine is America's problem. Although, of course, they want to be at the table when the issue is discussed with Moscow. Washington has long acted imperiously, attempting to discourage independent European military planning and action. However, the biggest inhibition to greater European action and coordination comes from Europe itself.

The Euro-American dynamic over “burden-sharing” misperceives the issue. The burden of Europe's defense should be borne by Europe. If special circumstances make that impossible—the continent's ravaged state at the end of World War II—then the U.S. could, and did, step in to provide a temporary shield. After which the burden should be shifted, not shared.

Observed Dwight D. Eisenhower: “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.” Surely nearly eight decades is long enough.

Moreover, it is not Washington's place to tell the Europeans how much to spend on the military. Most evidence little fear of Moscow. And, in truth, the likelihood of a revived Red Army marching on any European country is minute, if that.

So why do the Europeans even field armed forces? France and the U.K. still pretend to have global empires. But for what does Spain or Italy or even Germany need a military? Most European countries figure that fielding armed forces is something countries do. A few probably worry that disarming would be too much even for Washington, which might disband its defense dole in disgust. A handful, like the Baltics—small and next to the unhappy Russian Bear—might fear attack or at least coercion, but as noted earlier, if so, they do little surprisingly little to protect themselves, and it is difficult to imagine why Moscow would attack even them. The gain—a few ravaged lands depleted by refugees—would be minimal, while the costs—certainly economic isolation and likely a state of war if not active warfare with NATO—would be staggering.

Rather, the U.S. should simply inform the Europeans as to its plans and allow them to adjust accordingly. In this case Washington should indicate that it will phase out its troop deployments on the continent and renegotiate its base presence to ensure access in a crisis rather than maintain a permanent presence. Finally, the U.S. should propose discussions to refashion NATO, turning it over to Europe with American participation in an associate role. Responsibility for Europe's defense would be steadily shifted onto European nations, while transatlantic cooperation would remain vibrant for issues of common interest.

Then Europeans could respond as they wished. With more—or possibly less—military outlays; with a revised NATO; or with an alternative structure tied to the European Union. Washington would not try to dictate security policy to the Europeans.

Ukraine is in a tough neighborhood. However, aggressive U.S. and European policies toward Russia have turned Ukraine into a target. In the short-term Washington should back away and allow European governments to take the lead. In the long-term the Biden administration should begin shifting, not just sharing, the European defense burden.

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