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America's Fake European Friends

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During World War II Americans left the security of their own continent and helped save Western Europe from both Adolf Hitler's Germany and Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. In doing so Americans also rescued Germans from Nazism. During the Cold War Americans spent decades on duty confronting Moscow while the Europeans freeloaded on defense. Ultimately the continent exulted as the Berlin Wall fell, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and the Soviet Union collapsed — all courtesy decades of U.S. involvement.

Thank you, America? Well, not so much. That was then, this is now.

Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel is viewed as Europe's unofficial leader. She is the almost perfect incarnation of the progressive nostrums that increasingly drive the European Union and member governments, especially her own. Merkel made her so-called Christian Democratic Union indistinguishable from the Social Democrats, who have faded as "conservative" seized the Left's traditional issues. As a result, three of the last four governments have been socialist-lite "grand coalitions," in which the establishment parties stiched up power, positions, and policies. This helps explain the rise of the odious hard-right Alternative for Germany.

Merkel will leave office after the next election but remains the continent's most important politician — to French President Emmanuel Macron's eternal frustration. When asked about the confrontation between the U.S. and China, an increasingly totalitarian power without the slightest sympathy for Europe's PC-world, Merkel responded, "I would very much wish to avoid the building of blocs. I don't think it would do justice to many societies if we were to say this is the United States and over there is China and we are grouping around either the one or the other."

Well, sure. When the U.S. saw Europe on one side and the Soviet Union on the other, America chose Europe. That obviously was a mistake since Washington should have avoided "the building of blocs." It just didn't do justice to Moscow and its satellite states for America to be "grouping around the one or the other." Obviously, NATO was a big, long error. Thanks for pointing that out, Angela!

What better evidence is necessary to show that Donald Trump was right to trash the Eurocrats and question America's commitment to faithless friends who take Washington's support for granted? Actually, there is better evidence: a new poll from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

ECFR reported,

Our survey showed that Europeans' attitudes towards the United States have undergone a massive change. Majorities in key member states now think the U.S. political system is broken, that China will be more powerful than the U.S. within a decade, and that Europeans cannot rely on the U.S. to defend them. They are drawing radical consequences from these lessons. Large numbers think Europeans should invest in their own defense and look to Berlin rather than Washington as their most important partner. They want to be tougher with the U.S. on economic issues. And, rather than aligning with Washington, they want their countries to stay neutral in a conflict between the U.S. and Russia or China.

America's political system is broken. Thus say people from countries that have spawned far-right movements, brought hardline parties into government, held repeated inconclusive elections, confronted secessionist pressures, broken off the European Union, repeatedly empowered establishment coalitions, suffered economic collapse, demanded continental financial bailouts, dismantled democratic processes, tolerated extensive corruption, failed to contribute seriously to defense, and whined about the threat posed by Moscow. These people are complaining because Americans elected Donald Trump? Seriously?

The Europeans' shameless hypocrisy, irresponsibility, disloyalty, ungratefulness, and sanctimony are some of the reasons so many Republicans voted for Trump.

Alas, the poll gives reason after reason why Americans should resist President Joe Biden's naïve Europhilia. Almost half of Europeans polled believe the world is a worse place after Trump's presidency. More than a quarter don't believe Americans can be trusted after Trump's election. That number runs more than half in Germany and more than a third in Denmark, Sweden, and United Kingdom.

Over half of Europeans believe the U.S. political system is broken. The British take the lead, hitting 81 percent. The Germans, Danes, Dutch, and Swedes follow at 71 percent, 71 percent, 68 percent, and 67 percent, respectively. Only the Poles and Hungarians fall under a third.

When asked to join America in confronting China, most Europeans are not interested. Why not? Well, who wants to go with a loser? An amazing 59 percent believe that within a decade China will be the stronger power. These true believers hit 79 percent in Spain, 72 percent in Portugal, 72 percent in Italy, 62 percent in France, and 58 percent in the UK. Germany comes in at "only" 56 percent. Poland, Denmark, and Hungary run just under half, at 49 percent, 48 percent, and 48 percent.

These numbers highlight how few real friends America has in Europe. As ECFR noted, "Whereas, at the beginning of the century, European public opinion on the U.S. used to be divided along the lines of Donald Rumsfeld's 'old' and 'new' Europe, the current poll shows a great deal of convergence. Many differences between European societies remain, but the clear dividing lines have been blurred."

The survey posited an "In America We Trust" tribe, which ranged between 3 percent (Denmark and UK) and 22 percent (Italy). Germany was at 4 percent; France and Poland hit 12 percent. Far stronger was the "In Europe We Trust" grouping. At the top were Denmark (60 percent), Germany (53 percent), Sweden (51 percent), and the Netherlands (50 percent). At the bottom were Poland (14 percent), Hungary (18 percent), and Italy (18 percent). The latter were more inclined to trust "the West," which obviously includes the U.S., than just Europe.

Distrust in America is not all bad. The Council reported,

One of the most striking findings of ECFR's survey is that at least 60 per cent of respondents in every surveyed country — and an average of 67 per cent across all these countries — believe that they cannot always rely on the U.S. to defend them and, therefore, need to invest in European defense. Interestingly, 74 per cent of British respondents hold this view — a higher share than in any other national group.

The numbers are extraordinary. Two-thirds of Europeans acknowledge that “Europe can't always rely on the U.S.; we need to look after our own defense responsibilities.” The Dutch, Hungarians, and Italians are at the low end, at 60 percent, 61 percent, and 62 percent, respectively. France, Spain, Sweden, Portugal, and the UK came in at 70 percent or above. (Just 3 percent of Britons polled believed Washington always would be there for them.)

This, in turn, has led to a greater tendency to look around the continent for answers. The Council reported,

As they no longer see Washington as a reliable partner, Europeans are looking to one another more than they once did. This raises the issue of whether Berlin will replace Washington as the “go-to” capital. Given the size and importance of the “In Europe We Trust” group, it is not surprising that respondents in France, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Hungary were most likely to choose Germany as the most important country to build a good relationship with, above the U.S. (while, for their part, 38 per cent of Germans chose France as their most important ally, and only 35 per cent preferred the US). Only respondents in Great Britain (55 per cent), Poland (45 per cent), Italy (36 per cent), and Sweden (36 per cent) are more likely to rank the U.S. first over Germany on this measure; but, in Sweden, an almost equal share, 35 per cent, rank Germany above the U.S.

These results should surprise no one. The principle that welfare creates dependency applies to defense no less than any other policy issue. For years American officials insisted that they would always defend Europe while begging the continent to do more. This approach was a total bust. It was only when the Europeans no longer believed that Washington would keep its promises that their governments decided that they had to do more.

Better late than never.

Also important is the fact that Europeans decreasingly perceive that they face serious security threats. During the Cold War the Soviet Union loomed large. Russia is no replacement, at least not for anyone other than Poland (the Baltic states were not included).

ECFR explained that its poll also reveals a change in threat perceptions across Europe, most dramatically in Germany. During the cold war, Germany felt threatened by invasion and was, therefore, wedded to the Atlantic alliance. But, nowadays, Germans seem to have caught up with the French (whose country has the strongest military in the EU and is a long-time proponent of European defense integration) in feeling less of a need than other Europeans for the U.S. security guarantee. Currently, only 10 per cent of respondents in France and Germany say that their country needs the American security guarantee “a great deal” to be safe from military invasion. Only in Poland do a substantial number of respondents (44 per cent) believe that they need this guarantee “a great deal.” Therefore, it seems that Germany's — and Europe's — transatlantic policy in the years to come could be influenced not only by the country's increasing economic

ties with China but also by the fact that over half of the German public does not now see U.S. military power as an existential guarantee of its security.

Except for the case of Poland, Washington can easily reduce its commitment in the knowledge that its defense dependents don't feel threatened. And the likelihood of Russian aggression against any country other than its immediate neighbors is vanishingly small. (A Russian armada sailing against the UK or Slavic hordes pouring forth through the Fulda Gap headed for the Pyrenees have the makings of very bad Tom Clancy plot knockoffs.)

Much more disturbing from America's standpoint is the lack of faithfulness to the U.S. despite its longstanding commitment to protect Europe from Moscow. The Council explained,

Europe's unwillingness to side with the U.S. also comes out in respondents' views on a conflict between the U.S. and Russia: in no surveyed country would a majority want to take Washington's side. Amazingly, only 36 per cent of respondents in Poland and 40 per cent in Denmark say that their country should side with the U.S. in such a scenario. Across the 11 surveyed countries, just 23 per cent of respondents hold this view — while 59 per cent want their country to remain neutral. In Denmark and Poland, neutrality is the preferred option of 47 per cent and 45 per cent of voters respectively.

The only good news is that at most 10 percent (in both Italy and the Netherlands) of any given nation's population would go with Moscow. Still, the thought that 10 percent would go with Russia (thankfully only 2 percent in the UK) is sobering. And support for neutrality in the continent's three most important military powers — Germany, France, and Britain — runs 66 percent, 56 percent, and 56 percent, respectively. Really?!

The obvious question, then, is: why shouldn't the U.S. remain neutral if the Europeans find a few Russian T-14 Armata tanks at their doorstep? In fact, continental fecklessness long has been evident. In recent years publics across Europe have expressed their reluctance to go to war on behalf of their neighbors as well as America, while expecting their neighbors and America to stand by them. European governments remain committed to NATO, principally because they realize they get a phenomenal deal: U.S. protection from a nuclear-armed great power. Should a crisis arise, however, would those governments be willing to ignore popular sentiment and commit their nations to war?

If Europeans won't choose America over Russia, it should come as no surprise that they won't go with the U.S. over China. At least Washington should have no illusions about leading a grand coalition of freedom against Xi Jinping's neo-Maoist state.

The ECFR's findings are brutal:

At least half of the electorate in every surveyed country would like their government to remain neutral in a conflict between the U.S. and China. This even applies in Denmark and Poland, the two countries with the highest proportions of people who would like to take the United States' side — 35 per cent and 30 per cent respectively. This may reflect the fact that, although both Europeans and Americans are toughening up their approaches to China, their long-term goals are somewhat different. While Americans want to do so to decouple from and contain China, Europeans (above all Germans) still hope to bring China back into the rules-based system.

As with Russia, up to 10 percent would take China's side. (Predictably this includes the Dutch, who would do the same with Moscow; "only" 9 percent of Italians would go with Beijing.) Support for neutrality started at 50 percent (Denmark and Poland) and ranged up to 68 percent and 67 percent, respectively (Hungary and Portugal). Merkel's Germany came in at "only" 66 percent. Remind me again why I should be upset if conquering soldiers of the People's Liberation Army end up marching down the Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate.

There also is an increased European desire to be tough with the U.S. on economic issues, but that is only natural, since Washington did the same. Imposing unilateral sanctions on Europe always was foolish policy, guaranteed to backfire. The fact that the Europeans want to pursue their interest shouldn't bother Americans. But the reality that the Europeans perceive their interest to be joining the Chinese and/or Russians or at least staying neutral between the former and America should be of great concern.

As the Council observed, belief in a serious, shared threat during the Cold War made it easier for continental governments to ignore public opinion on behalf of the transatlantic alliance. Not so much today: "While all European governments will try to build a close relationship with the Biden administration, they will not feel that they have public support to make major concessions on high-profile issues of national importance."

Biden and those around him may not like the idea of "America first." The Europeans put their own countries first, however, despite their more multilateral rhetoric. And that is only likely to continue in the days ahead.

The U.S. should continue to cooperate with our cousins across the pond. But Americans should have no illusions about the support they are likely to receive when dealing with Beijing, Moscow, or any of the other nations on Washington's naughty list. In the end, the problem really isn't Donald Trump. The problem is the Europeans.

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