



The Challenge of Foreign Policy Free Riding: Limited Government for Me, Not for Thee

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Free riding is a constant of international relations. That is evident in Europe today.

The Ukraine crisis understandably has Europe on edge. But no one – Russian, Ukrainian, America, or European – believes that Europeans will fight for Kyiv. To simply raise the issue is to elicit a snicker. Modern Europeans believe their birthright is not to have to fight, that if they are threatened their defense is to be provided by Americans.

Ironically, that assumption reflects as much contempt as respect for the US. Many Europeans possess a barely suppressed sense of moral superiority over the colossus of the New World, with its overt capitalist ethos, ragged welfare state, surplusage of guns, widespread religious commitment, rejection of solidarity politics, and ignorance of all things foreign. To be fair, criticisms across the Pond are not without some basis, as is evident from the bitter, increasingly dangerous political divides and policy failures in America today. Still, even those Europeans filled with condescension continue to look westward for protection from the vicissitudes of a dangerous world.

However, widespread disdain for the results of the vaunted American political experiment has done little to diminish the desire to clamber aboard the US defense dole. Europeans who routinely deride Washington's blundering interventions abroad nevertheless even more loudly insist that American policymakers should constantly reassure them that sufficient American military personnel are always available to die on their behalf should that become necessary. To question this demand is to be denounced as an isolationist and worse.

Consider European military spending. NATO stands for North America and the Others. According to NATO figures, America came in at 3.6 percent of GDP. Of the other 29 members, only Greece devoted more effort than the US – to confront not Russia, but long-term enemy though fellow alliance member Turkey. Another outlier was tiny Croatia, which approached three percent.

France, Great Britain, Romania, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia hit or broke two percent, NATO's agreed-upon standard. Everyone else, including Germany, Italy, and Spain, fell below.

Even two percent is not impressive for nations – most notably Poland and the three Baltic States – which spend every moment of everyday warning about Moscow’s every move, complaining about the unfairness of the world, and demanding a permanent US troop presence. Do they believe their freedom is worth only two cents on the Euro? The gulf in combat capabilities between America and Europe is even greater than the spending differential. But then, as noted before, defense is Washington’s, not Brussels’ job.

Since 2014 Russia’s abusive behavior and Washington’s whining have spurred some European countries to spend more. But not that much more. And Europe’s largest nations with the greatest potential – Spain, Italy, Germany, France, and Britain – are unlikely to do enough to confront the presumed threat they want America to defend them from.

Indeed, Europeans evidence no shame in forever cheap-riding on the US. For instance, in a 2020 Pew Research Center poll majorities in 8 of 16 European states said they opposed fighting for NATO allies against Russia. In another three countries pluralities rejected defending their neighbors. The overall median result was 50 to 38 percent against. In Poland, where caterwauling about the supposed Russian threat is constant, opponents outpolled proponents by 43 to 40 percent. One can imagine their response if they had been asked about risking life and limb on behalf of Kyiv, to which their nation has no legal obligation. Predictably, however, most Europeans said they expected the US to drop everything elsewhere and save them, if necessary. They don’t believe their allies are worth supporting, but no worries: the Yanks, though unsuited for inclusion in polite European society, will take care of everything.

This attitude seems particularly well-suited to European socialists and social democrats, whose definition of solidarity is that someone else always should provide whatever they desire. Usually that means cash and services, traditionally from their own countries but of late also from the European Union. However, only America has lots of tanks, missiles, and soldiers, so Europe’s uncouth cousin across the way is expected to share its military bounty. After all, the Eurocrats who dominate continental politics believe such support is a matter of right since they are busy doing good around the world, in contrast to Uncle Sam, with his selfish and militaristic nature.

Yet similar beliefs also appear entrenched among European liberals, the strongest continental force for limited government. Liberalism once was the philosophy of human liberation. It arose at a time to fight against both conservative (traditional) aristocracy and radical collectivism, most notably socialism and communism.

Early liberals also typically favored peace. The United Kingdom’s Richard Cobden and John Bright were true internationalists, supporting free trade, opposing colonialism, and promoting peace. However, some liberals were captivated by the Sirens’ song of martial glory. For instance, Germany’s National Liberal Party formed in 1867 and included many who supported Imperial Germany’s aggressive foreign policy and imperialistic aims in World War I.

Today Europe’s liberals had added their own unique twist. They also believe defense, weapons, and war are America’s job. Their countries should promote markets, limit expenditures, and protect individual liberty. Their peoples should enjoy the blessings of freedom, prosperity, and peace. As for confronting international threats, that isn’t their job. Call in the American cavalry!

It's a great scam if you can make it work. In fact, the US played a similar trick during the American Revolution and it probably made the difference between victory and defeat. Fighting Great Britain, the globe's most important colonial power, was a daunting task. London had money as well as men, which allowed it to hire well-trained mercenaries. The American colonists were badly outmatched.

However, becoming number one made the British a lot of enemies. One was Imperial France, which had been defeated a few years before in the Seven Year's War (French and Indian War to Americans), which cost it Quebec, its main North American territory. So the American colonists sought support from their former enemies. Covert support, mostly weapons and gunpowder, began in 1776.

The following year, after the major American victory at Saratoga, France decided that the colonists had a chance and formally entered the war. French aid was vital in the 1781 battle of Yorktown, which forced the surrender of an entire British army. That effectively ended the war, though peace was not formally agreed to for another two years. A century and a half later, the 13 newly freed colonies had evolved into the world's most powerful nation.

Although French support was a great deal for the US, France did not similarly prosper. Fighting in the larger conflict – essentially a global contest, or world war, which had also drawn in Spain and the Netherlands – continued after Yorktown. The war ended in a compromise that restored French prestige but left it nearly insolvent. The French Revolution erupted four years later, which cost Louis XVI his head.

That experience provides a lesson for the US. Europe is filled with supposed friends prepared to fight Russia, or anyone else who might be a threat, *to the last American*. This isn't simply a European syndrome. Both Saudi Arabia and Israel keep hoping Washington will dispose of their beta noire, Iran. Japan spent the entire Cold War scrimping on its military, assuming Washington would always be there. Taiwan, facing the Chinese colossus barely 100 miles away, dawdles on defense while assuming Americans will fight.

What makes Europe different is the significant presence of liberals who advocate limited, constitutional government. It turns out their stance is fiscal sobriety, individual liberty, military restraint, and perpetual peace for everyone *but the US*. In their view, America's classical liberals should support the warfare state, despite its ill impact on Americans for the same reasons European liberals advocate limited government at home. Put simply, European liberals want the US to maintain a very unliberal foreign policy and military for their benefit.

There's nothing wrong with asking, of course. That's what the US did more than two centuries ago in Paris. However, as the French monarchy learned to its great regret, wrecking its finances to advance the American cause turned into a suicide mission. Washington isn't in quite as bad a shape, but a fiscal tsunami is on its way.

The national debt is over \$30 trillion. Strip out inter-governmental debt (basically the Treasury borrowing from Social Security, a fake transaction) and the debt held by the public is \$23.5 trillion, a bit over 100 percent of GDP. With America's aging population and high health care

costs, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid outlays will be speeding upward, along with interest payments from the accumulating debt. By mid-century US debt will be twice GDP. However, fiscal collapse is possible well before then, as confidence in Washington's ability to service that debt load dissipates.

European liberals might be frustrated when their brethren across the Pond oppose turning America into GloboCop, detailed to protect their interests. However, US foreign policy is, first and foremost, about America. Washington's duty is to protect this nation, its people, territory, liberties, and prosperity. And the best way to do that is through a policy of restraint, with war a last resort. That means refusing to make other nations' conflicts America's own, absent a compelling security justification. Including in Europe today.

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