



## **Another NATO Summit, Another Endless Subsidy for Europe**

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President Joe Biden is visiting Europe, spreading hugs and kisses to lovelorn European officials traumatized by Donald Trump's oft-expressed disdain. Fearful that the good times of American security guarantees might end, Europeans contemplated a world in which they might have to do their own heavy lifting when it came their defense. Oh, the horror, the injustice of life! But that fear has vanished with Joe Biden in the White House.

Monday's NATO summit meeting was, in fact, a largely perfunctory affair. There wasn't anything urgent to do. Little other than platitudes, alongside requisite mention of China (a "challenge") and much heavier criticism of Russia (a "threat"), emerged from the gathering. The main question then, as before, is: why does the U.S. still defend populous, prosperous nations which have proved their prowess in war over the past centuries?

Despite endless kvetching, worrying, and whining about Russia's Vladimir Putin, there is no indication that he is contemplating an attempt to play Adolf Hitler late in life. Nor would Moscow gain any obvious benefit from such an effort.

Putin is no friend of liberty, and Russia is stronger than commonly claimed, but nothing in his behavior suggests an interest in conquest for conquest's sake. A continent with a half billion people would be much too large for Russia to consume. Ukraine alone would be indigestible. Moscow could seize the three Baltic states, with full-scale war the only way to force him to disgorge his trophies. But to what end? The territory isn't particularly valuable. Much of the population would flee. That which remained wouldn't be particularly productive in captivity.

In the best case Russia would face debilitating economic sanctions and armed hostility from the West, distant wariness from Central Asian neighbors, and suspicious neutrality from China. The worst case would be full-scale war, which could easily go nuclear. Although Putin's judgment is sometimes questionable – for instance, ostentatiously employing assassination teams using banned substances – nothing suggests that he is anxious to depart the earth in a radioactive funeral pyre.

Beyond Moscow, there is no there there when it comes to serious, let alone existential security threats. European policymakers occasionally suffer frightening nightmares, such as Iranian missile attacks on the continent, but such scenarios are implausible and well within the abilities of a collection of the world's most advanced states to handle. What other nearby countries seem capable of let alone interested in doing Europe harm?

Terrorism would remain a challenge, though avoiding participation in endless wars against Muslim nations would dramatically reduce that risk: the Islamic State struck Parisians in 2015 only after France had been bombing the ISIS capital of Raqqa for months. Mass migration from North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East might continue to be disruptive, but that is not an issue for the military. Cyber security warrants international cooperation but has little to do with military outlays and deployments. China poses an economic, not military, challenge, and no one imagines that Europeans who are unwilling to do anything much to defend themselves from Russia would send an expedition halfway around the world to combat Beijing, whatever their rhetoric Monday.

That doesn't mean that Europe shouldn't organize some form of collective defense. The continent is quite capable of doing so. That would require real resources and effort, however, which is the fundamental problem.

A recent report from the Center for American Progress noted: "European militaries have now experienced decades of decline. Today, much of Europe's military hardware is in a shocking state of disrepair. Too many of Europe's forces aren't ready to fight. Its fighter jets and helicopters aren't ready to fly; its ships and submarines aren't ready to sail; and its vehicles and tanks aren't ready to roll. Europe lacks the critical capabilities for modern warfare, including so-called enabling capabilities – such as air-refueling to support fighter jets, transport aircraft to move troops to the fight, and the high-end reconnaissance and surveillance drones essential for modern combat. European forces aren't ready to fight with the equipment they have, and the equipment they have isn't good enough."

Most pitiable, perhaps, is the once vaunted German military. Because of Berlin's monstrous role in World War II, it has taken decades for Europeans' discomfort and Germans' shame to ease. Yet even now that nation's officials acknowledge Europe's and especially Germany's failure to take seriously their respective defense responsibilities.

Last November Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer told a Bundeswehr audience that "Without America's nuclear and conventional capabilities, Germany and Europe cannot protect themselves. Those are plain facts." Despite the continent's pretensions of equality with America, "According to estimates by the renowned London-based RUSI institute, the United States currently provides 75 percent of all NATO capabilities."

Perversely, Europe's lack of preparedness is not only due to the continent's preference for cheap-riding, which is real. This counterproductive situation also reflects Washington's determination to dominate. The US wants Europe to do more, but only under American direction. The objective: a continent that is better-armed but still helplessly dependent, ready to do Washington's bidding.

Noted the Center: "Since the 1990s, the United States has typically used its effective veto power to block the defense ambitions of the European Union. This has frequently resulted in an absurd

situation where Washington loudly insists that Europe do more on defense but then strongly objects when Europe's political union – the European Union – tries to answer the call. This policy approach has been a grand strategic error – one that has weakened NATO militarily, strained the trans-Atlantic alliance, and contributed to the relative decline in Europe's global clout. As a result, one of America's closest partners and allies of first resort is not nearly as powerful as it could be."

Thus, Biden should not tell his European counterparts that his objective is the status quo ante. Rather, he should indicate that he is moving forward, beyond presumed continental subservience. Biden should express support for genuine equality, meaning a Europe ready to defend itself and cooperate with America to serve mutual interests beyond.

No doubt, making such a dramatic change would take time. However, as my Cato Institute colleague Justin Logan noted: "Washington doesn't have to simply pull up stakes and walk away from Europe impulsively. There are modest steps it could begin taking today. For example, Washington could push for the next supreme allied commander in Europe to be a European. Historically, the position has always been staffed by an American. It should also consider withdrawing some US troops, as a spur to action. A large plurality of Germans supported former President Donald Trump's proposal to withdraw 12,000 US troops from Germany, despite the policy's association with Trump. Expensive and unnecessary commitments were one thing in the 1990s. They are another matter in 2021."

Military spending has become the most frequently cited measure of effort, and on it the continent continues to disappoint despite modest increases that began after Russia's aggressive moves in 2014 (not, as Trump claimed, in response to his maladroit demands). However, all trail the US, which, of course, is expected to protect not only Europe but Asia and the Middle East, while combating terrorism in Africa and policing conflict and oppression in Latin America.

Of the ten countries which meet or surpass the official NATO standards, only two are major factors, the United Kingdom and France, former great powers with continuing international aspirations and vestigial colonial empires to manage. Left off the list are other important countries with sizable economies, most notably Germany, Italy, and Spain.

Greece is most interested in confronting another NATO member, Turkey (which comes close to two percent while focusing on contingencies other than Russia). Also on the list are Romania, Norway, Slovakia, Poland, and the three Baltic states. The latter four are particularly unimpressive, despite having hit two percent because they are frontline states as it were – if they really felt threatened by Moscow, as they often and loudly proclaim, why do they treat their freedom as worth only a couple cents on the Euro?

And if the European Union really wants to be a Weltmacht of sorts, competitive with the US and China, two percent should be only the beginning. Kramp-Karranbauer admitted the uncomfortable truth: "The costs of strategic autonomy in the sense of a complete de-coupling from the USA would, by the way, be much higher than the two percent of Gross Domestic Product that we have committed to in the Atlantic Alliance." Instead, the Europeans have chosen dependency. Some simply don't believe they face any serious threats. Others refuse to make an effort, especially for their neighbors.

A 2020 Pew Research Center survey polled fourteen NATO members (European plus Canada), discovering that in only four – Canada, Lithuania, Netherlands, UK – did a majority of people support fighting for their allies. Frontline state Poland came in at only 40 percent. In Germany, the most powerful European nation, the number was 34 percent. Greece and Italy brought up the rear at 25 percent each.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the 2019 report by the European Council on Foreign Relations which found: "In conflicts between the US and either China or Russia, [European voters] have a clear preference for the EU to remain neutral, pursuing a middle way between competing great powers. In all but one member state, most people favor such neutrality in both scenarios. The exception is Poland, where most citizens would want the EU to side with the US in a dispute with Russia. And, even there, 45 percent of people would opt for neutrality."

In 11 of the 14 countries surveyed neutralist sentiment topped 60 percent. Backing for America was under ten percent in three nations. The US reached 12 percent in Germany, 17 percent in Italy and Spain, and 18 percent in France. However, the vast majority of Europeans still expect Washington to come to their aid. Even when America is increasingly busy elsewhere. Said Kramp-Karrenbauer: "We thus have a vested interest in ensuring that America continues its commitment to defending Europe while shifting its strategic focus to Asia."

For good reason Lauren Speranza of the Center for European Policy Analysis worried: "Today, a new generation of allied citizens is questioning" NATO's value, "putting the Alliance's future at risk." Or, more accurately, they are questioning why they should have to make any military effort on their own behalf.

To recap, the threat against Europe appears small. The Europeans aren't interested in spending much to protect themselves. They also don't want to aid their nominal allies. And if asked to back the US most would look at their calendars and declare that they were busy, very busy. Yet Americans are supposed to continue spending their money and risking their lives to protect the Europeans? Even when the US faces enormous problems at home, including a rapidly increasing national debt, which as a burden on the economy will surpass World War II levels this year and could hit more than 200 percent of GDP by 2050?

Change is long overdue. Rather than attempt to show superficial relevance to Washington's anti-China campaign – by, for instance, "offering a militarily trivial naval presence to the US effort to confront China," in Logan's words – NATO should focus on Europe's defense. And the Europeans should take over that effort. The US and the continent should continue to cooperate on other matters of shared interest, but Americans should no longer do what the Europeans can and should do.

Such a disengagement process would require cooperation and commitment, best achieved without rancor. Of course, Biden seems unlikely to be such an advocate. During the campaign he promised: "Day 1, if I win, I'm going to be on the phone with our NATO allies saying we're back. We're back and you can count on us again."

However, reality will increasingly constrain Washington's ability to defend the entire world. Biden would be the best architect of a more restrained military strategy. As a longtime committed Atlanticist, the former could play a "Nixon to China" role in Europe. And, in contrast to Trump, he could present an unpleasant message with tact rather than venom. It is time for

European governments to grow up and do their fair share, which means take over responsibility for their own security.

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