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Opposition Social Democrats Run Against Angela Merkel -- And Defense Of Germany And Europe

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Even before becoming president Donald Trump railed against the Europeans' refusal to spend more on their own defense. Since entering the Oval Office he focused much of his ire on Germany, the continent's wealthiest nation which had repeatedly demonstrated its prowess in war.

"Germany owes vast sums of money to NATO," said the president earlier this year. America "must be paid for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!" Berlin wasn't pleased with President Trump's musings. Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen declared that the "modern concept of security" required more than spending on weapons, even as her nation relied on America's prodigious spending on weapons.

Still, the Merkel government increased defense outlays in 2016. Berlin claimed even greater success in raising the percentage of GDP devoted to the military from 1.18 percent then to 1.22 percent this year—a number still unlikely to impress Americans who have been paying for decades to send troops and materiel to Germany and elsewhere on the continent. Indeed, despite the president's criticisms, his administration proposed spending \$4.8 billion next year on the "European Reassurance Initiative," intended to help people who won't hike their own defense outlays sleep better at night.

At least Chancellor Angela Merkel acknowledged that Germany's anemic military spending was inadequate and pledged to meet the NATO standard of two percent of GDP by 2024. (Only four European members do so today.) However, no one takes her promise seriously: at its present rate of increase Germany won't hit that level until 2030, and the defense budget is expected to fall back to 1.17 percent of GDP in 2018, below last year's level. In January the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces pointedly complained that "The greatest problem now is—a lack of urgency!"

Without a foreign policy that justifies a larger military, Berlin is left playing arbitrary statistical games. Argued Stefan Theil of *Handelsblatt Global Magazine*: "As long as Germany does not have a clear strategy for how and why it deploys its forces, its military upgrades will remain halfhearted. And as long as the Bundeswehr's mandates nearly always exclude combat, the country's allies will continue to worry that Germany will shirk its responsibilities in a security crisis."

But a bigger problem is voter opposition to higher military outlays. Social Democratic Party leader Martin Schulz, who trails Merkel in the polls, targeted the government's proposed increase, which he tied to President Trump, who has a five percent approval rating in Germany.

Schulz and SPD parliamentary head Thomas Oppermann wrote: “We say a clear no to the ‘two-percent target’ of Trump” and Merkel’s party. Schulz and Oppermann added: “It’s not only unrealistic, it is simply the wrong goal.” Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, an SPD member of the coalition government, said the election offered a vote on whether Germany “remained a force for peace or followed Trump’s armament madness.”

Schulz’s strategy may be a desperation “Hail Mary,” but 15 years ago SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder staged a come-from-behind victory by attacking George W. Bush’s plan to invade Iraq. Schroeder had the advantage of being the incumbent and running against a war rather than a statistic. Still, on defense Schulz is closer to the voters than Chancellor Merkel.

Obviously, the German people are entitled to decide on how much they want to spend on the military. After World War II Germany’s neighbors feared a Teutonic revival. But the Cold War required Europe’s dominant military power to rearm. Then came what journalist Elizabeth Braw described as “two and a half decades of cuts that saw the Bundeswehr’s budget shrink almost every year—from 3.2 percent of German GDP in 1983 to 1.2 percent in 2014.” In 1990 Germany had a half million men and women under arms. The number was 175,000 last year.

Moreover, explained Braw: “The German military doesn’t just lack equipment: over recent years, maintenance has been so neglected that much of Germany’s existing stock has been unusable.” This year’s parliamentary assessment of the Bundeswehr found a lack of such essentials as uniforms, guns, and ammunition; soldiers used broomsticks instead of guns and vans instead of armored personnel carriers in training. Even Poland, once among the states which most feared a powerful Germany, complained of Berlin’s military weakness.

But with even greater cause for complaint is the U.S. Germany led the Europeans in cutting military outlays and capabilities. At this point, argued the University of Sydney’s Salvatore Babones, “NATO’s vaunted Article 5 commitment to collective defense has become, in effect, a unilateral U.S. security guarantee.” Such a system made sense in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when American forces were needed to shield war-ravaged Western Europe from Soviet coercion or conquest. But not today, when the continent equals U.S. economic strength and possesses a greater population.

Over the last couple of years more European states, Germany included, decided they at least had to appear to be doing more. But while the Merkel government claims to be going in the right direction, the Bundeswehr remains a shadow of its once formidable self—even something of a joke. A few years ago British tabloid papers ran stories on fat and indolent Germany soldiers gorging themselves on sausages and beer while stationed in Afghanistan.

Even Berlin’s ongoing efforts to rearm show how far the Bundeswehr has to go. For instance, the latter plans to increase its fleet of main battle tanks from 225 to 320—but not until 2023. (Russia has 2700 MBTs today.) Overall, complained the Parliamentary Commissioner, “the growth in defense spending planned beyond 2017 is too small to guarantee the personnel and materiel gaps found in the Bundeswehr will be closed.” Thus, more money must come from a skeptical public.

Which suggests that even a reelected Chancellor Merkel would find it difficult if not impossible to essentially double military outlays. Foreign Minister Gabriel called the objective “completely unrealistic” which no German politician “would claim that is reachable nor desirable.”

The problem is simple: the German people don't perceive a serious threat. Russian President Vladimir Putin is a nasty character, but no one imagines a revived Red Army again marching on Berlin. And, truth be told, the Germans don't care much about the Baltic States, which feel most vulnerable, even though Moscow isn't likely to attack them either.

Unlike a succession of U.S. administrations, no German government is interested in coddling, counseling, and "reassuring" its NATO allies. If Moscow unexpectedly invaded one of the border states, Germany would leave the heavy lifting to America. In fact, a May Pew Research Center poll found just 40 percent Germans willing to support other member states against a Russian attack, the lowest percentage in eight nations polled.

Alas, as long as the U.S. insists on defending allies which aren't interested in doing much to defend themselves or their neighbors, why should Germany or anyone else do more? A parade of U.S. presidents and defense secretaries have urged, commanded, and begged the Europeans to spend more. And the latter have dissembled, while refusing to divert money from their nations' generous welfare states. President Trump's unusually blunt demands have gotten the continent's attention, but with an evanescent attention span he seems likely to be satisfied by minimal increases and unconvincing promises, precisely what Berlin has so far delivered. Substantively, nothing is likely to change.

At least the Trump administration has created some uncertainty, perhaps inadvertently. In May Chancellor Merkel told a political rally: "the times in which we could totally rely on others are to some extent over." Now is the time for Europeans to "take their destiny into their own hands." That is a better message than the Obama administration's attempt at constant reassurance, with little pressure on fellow NATO members to do more for themselves.

The spectacle of America again becoming a political issue in Germany is a good reminder why Washington shouldn't attempt to micromanage the world. When President Trump tells Europe what he wants he naturally sparks angry resistance. Even if Schulz loses the election, the passions he inflamed will make it harder for another Merkel government to follow through on its promise.

Instead, American officials should explain what America will and will not do. Washington should state simply that it won't subsidize the defense of even good friends if they are capable of protecting themselves. In the case of Europe the U.S. should turn NATO's leadership over to the Europeans, shift to an associate role, and bring home its troops. The two continents should cooperate and coordinate, but on issues of mutual interest where American assistance is necessary.

Washington's role shouldn't depend on how much the Europeans spend on the military. U.S. forces should be withdrawn because they no longer are needed. If Germany and its neighbors don't want to spend the money necessary to guarantee their own security, that would be fine. They just would have to bear the consequences. There would be no U.S. bail-out for governments unwilling.

What that means for Germany is difficult to predict. Would the two-thirds of Germans who currently oppose increasing military outlays continue to do so if the U.S. dropped its promise to fight for Berlin to the last American? We won't know until a president finally treats alliances as a matter of security rather than charity and puts this nation's interests before those of other states.

U.S. officials have spent decades pressing for more burden-sharing. That's proved to be a frustrating and ultimately unfruitful demand. The Europeans have mostly ignored Washington's pleas and continued to enjoy nestling in Uncle Sam's outstretched arms. Instead, American officials should engage in burden-shedding, leaving other peoples with responsibility to protect themselves. If they refuse to do so, Washington won't bother them. However, there will be no new American Expeditionary Force to save them.

Donald Trump's criticisms of Europe and NATO are well-founded. But instead of trying to force America's defense dependents to act responsibly, Washington should simply stop providing the international equivalent of welfare. It is up to the people of Germany and other alliance members to decide whether their nations are worth defending.

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