



Why Don't Europeans Provide Troops for Europe's Defense?

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Three years ago the U.S. withdrew combat units from Europe. Now it is sending them back, with regular rotations, to deter a Russian attack. Explained Brig. Gen. Timothy Daugherty: "Preparing for war is a lot cheaper than executing one."

True. But why isn't Europe doing the preparing?

During the Cold War the U.S. had about 300,000 troops in Europe. The number was down to 65,000 a couple years ago. Even so, that was too many: the continent long ago should have graduated from America's defense dole. Yet the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had extended up to Russia's borders and was threatening to add Georgia and Ukraine, former territories within the Russian Empire as well as Soviet Union. From Moscow's perspective NATO continued to play the containment game, only up to Russia's borders and into its former heartland.

Along the way Washington and Brussels had dismantled Serbia with nary a consideration of Russia's historic interests in the Balkans. The U.S. created relationships and gained bases even in Central Asia. America's policy looked to be the reverse of the infamous "Brezhnev Doctrine": what's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable.

Although the consensus in Washington long was to treat the Defense Department as a fount of international welfare, protecting prosperous and populous allies, candidate Donald Trump suggested the possibility of change in criticizing U.S. defense subsidies for the Europeans. Since he took office he has taken credit for minor increases in European military outlays, while following his predecessors in sacrificing the interest of Americans for the benefit of European governments still unwilling to take their own defense seriously.

Many perceive no serious security threat: no one any longer imagines Russian legions sweeping through Europe to the Atlantic. Other European governments, whether they worry or not, figure Washington will defend them essentially no matter what. So why burden European taxpayers when the bill can be sent to America?

Why are Washington policymakers, and especially President Trump, so anxious to make Americans bear that burden? Vladimir Putin is a nasty character. No surprise there. But the world is filled with unpleasant authoritarians. That doesn't make them enemies of America.

Despite the overwrought rhetoric that fills Washington, Moscow poses no serious military threat to the U.S. Apparently mucking around in the 2016 election was offensive, but Washington has done the same, only far more often in more nations. The Trump administration should insist that Russia desist, while promising not to make the same mistake in the future.

The Russian Federation is the only nation with a comparable nuclear force, but to use it would guarantee destructive retaliation. Although Russia rebuilt its conventional forces after the Soviet Union's collapse, Moscow is a serious regional, not global, power. Nothing suggests that Putin has the slightest interest in a confrontation with America.

Moreover, the U.S. and Russia have no substantial disagreement over important interests. Instead, the two governments have collided on peripheral issues—such as Syria (with which Moscow long was allied and matters little to America) and Georgia/Ukraine (which are not important for U.S. security). In contrast, both America and Russia fear Islamic terrorism, oppose a nuclear Iran and North Korea, and face a potentially aggressive China.

Yet Washington is putting American troops back on the continent. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said that “We, the U.S. Army, think that additional capability is probably needed” to deter Russia. U.S. Army Europe commander Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges declared that “We’re going to do this as long as it is necessary.” There is, he added, “no off-ramp in the future.”

What are the Europeans doing? They are, well, busy. Or perhaps feel that they gave at the office.

Europe already spends twice as much as Russia. If the respective governments aren't spending effectively, they need to fix that, not expect Washington again step in. And they could do much more if they felt threatened. Gen. Hodges lauded Lithuania for devoting 2.07 percent of GDP on the military, but if that government is nervously awaiting the arrival of Russian tank divisions, it should double or triple its outlays. The point is not to defeat Moscow's legions, but to ensure that any attack would be costly and not worth the price.

So too Estonia, Latvia, and Poland. They all seem to crave American garrisons. What they should receive are contingents from their European neighbors.

But move away from the border states and most Europeans are too busy to bother much with military matters. Germany's outlays went from 1.18 to 1.22 percent of GDP from last year to this year, but are expected to drop back in 2018.

It's fair to assume that no one in Germany, at least, expects the Bundeswehr to be in action. Even Germans tell the joke that their soldiers' role is to stop the Russians until real military forces arrive. The likelihood of Germans heading east to save the Baltics, or Poland, or anyone else is minimal at best.

However, who believes Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, Danish, Montenegrin, Luxembourgian, Slovenian, Slovakian, and Czech troops will make up a grand expeditionary force to push back jackbooted Putinistas? As once was said of Oakland, there's no there there when it comes to most European militaries.

The problem is not inadequate resources. European nations collectively have a larger population and equivalent economy as America. Their military strength lags behind that of America but they are not helpless. On a power index France and the United Kingdom are next, followed by Turkey. Then come Germany and Italy, which could do so much more if they desired.

And the Europeans have plenty of military manpower. Turkey alone has nearly 400,000 men under arms. Admittedly Ankara isn't looking much like a loyal ally these days, but if not, why is it still in NATO? In any case, Italy has some 250,000 citizens under arms. France about 200,000. Germany 180,000. Greece about 160,000 and the United Kingdom more than 150,000. Spain has 124,000. And they could expand their forces if they believed there was a security justification for doing so. Instead of the U.S., these countries should be offering the extra combat brigades and a lot more to deter Russia.

More than seven decades after the close of World War II, the Western Europeans have recovered economically, overturned alien communist regimes, and absorbed Central and Eastern European states into the European project. Collectively they vastly outstrip the remains of the once fearsome Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

Moscow can beat up on a small neighbor, such as Georgia, but could not easily swallow Ukraine and certainly not conquer Europe. And if there is any doubt about the latter, the Europeans could accelerate militarily past what is a declining power facing economic stasis, demographic decline, and political crisis in upcoming years.

Uncle Sam is effectively bankrupt. It faces trillion dollar deficits in coming years. Yet Congress refuses to make tough decisions, preferring to reduce revenues rather than address spending. As federal debt, social spending, and foreign commitments collide, crisis is likely to force action. The latter are likely to suffer. Few Americans will volunteer to sacrifice their benefits so the Europeans can continue to underwrite a generous welfare state rather than enhance military defense. Better for Washington to make cutbacks systematically and rationally, rather than frantically in the midst of a crisis.

The Europeans will never cease calling for increased U.S. military commitments. But U.S. officials could stop offering to pay. Washington should remain in NATO and other alliances only so long as they advance America's security interests. Defending countries well able to protect themselves does not do so.

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