

Newsweek

Trump Is Right: Our Allies Should Defend Themselves

Ted Galen Carpenter

May 6, 2016

In both his March *New York Times* [interview](#) and his more recent foreign policy [speech](#) at the Mayflower Hotel, presidential candidate Donald J. Trump has created tremors within America's stodgy, utterly complacent foreign policy elite.

He has alarmed those self-anointed Mandarins regarding several issues, including his comments that under certain circumstances he would not object to Japan and South Korea acquiring independent nuclear deterrents.

But his comments about NATO have probably caused the most consternation. Trump's own preference appears to be for greater burden-sharing within the alliance—a unicorn that American politicians, policymakers and pundits have been chasing for more than six decades.

But there is a much sharper edge to his demands than there are to the calls from most proponents of burden-sharing. "Our allies are not paying their fair share," Trump thundered in his speech at the Mayflower Hotel. "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, *and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves.*" [Emphasis added]

One must go back to the mid-1950s to find a warning that stark. Probably the most significant and best known example was the threat that [Secretary of State John Foster Dulles issued to conduct an "agonizing reappraisal"](#) of America's defense commitment to Europe if the NATO allies could not develop a united policy regarding West Germany and make a more serious effort at collective defense.

Yet even that effort at brass knuckles diplomacy ultimately failed. European leaders never took the warning seriously, believing that their American counterparts regarded Europe as far too important to America's own security and prosperity to ever consider abandoning the continent to possible Soviet domination.

They called the Eisenhower administration's bluff and quickly confirmed that it was a bluff. There was no reappraisal of Washington's defense commitment to Europe, agonizing or otherwise.

A Trump administration would likely find intense institutional resistance even to more limited cutbacks. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) discovered the power of the bipartisan pro-NATO lobby in the 1970s when he merely sought to reduce the number of U.S. troops stationed in Europe.

The push to expand the alliance and desperate search to find alternative missions for the organization, even though the Soviet Union (the principal reason for NATO's creation) dissolved at the end of 1991, is ample testimony to the extent of those entrenched, vested interests on both sides of the Atlantic.

But the vastly changed economic and security environment—a fiscally stressed America, a populous and relatively prosperous democratic Europe and a weak, declining Russia, gives Trump's threat of a U.S. withdrawal unprecedented credibility.

The nations of the European Union now have both a larger population and a larger collective economy than does the United States. They also have a population three times larger than Russia's and an economy nearly ten times larger. They can afford to build whatever military forces they deem necessary to defend their region.

With regard to the other troubling security problem facing the alliance, Islamic extremism, several of the European powers are the old colonial rulers in the Middle East.

Trump and other Americans could be excused if they concluded that perhaps the Europeans should step up to take care of a security headache in their neighborhood instead of always expecting their NATO ally to ride in from several thousand miles away to resolve the problem. We have tried that strategy for decades without much success.

Mr. Trump, your complaints about NATO just identify the symptoms of the underlying problem. The real problem is Europe's unnatural and unhealthy continued security dependence on the United States.

We don't need greater NATO burden sharing. We need to shed our obsolete NATO burden entirely. Being prepared "to let these countries defend themselves" should not be a policy of last resort. It should be our primary objective.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.