



NATO, European spending and US grievances

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The Obama administration is displaying increasing impatience with the military spending of America's NATO partners. According to *The Telegraph*, President Obama admonished British Prime Minister David Cameron during a private meeting in January not to cut the UK defense budget below the benchmark of 2% of the country's gross domestic product. The 2% figure is the standard that NATO members adopted as a goal for the minimum level of defense spending following the alliance summit in 2006. One source told *The Telegraph* that Obama stressed to Cameron that "if Britain doesn't spend 2% on defense, than no one in Europe will."

That is a realistic fear. Despite the 2006 commitment, only the United States, Britain, Greece, and Estonia currently spend at least 2% of annual GDP on defense. What is especially worrisome and frustrating to US officials is that several major NATO powers, including Germany, Italy, and Spain, have spending levels far below the 2% threshold. By comparison, just the US base military budget is more than 4% of a much larger GDP, and if overseas contingency spending for supposed emergency missions (like the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) is included, Washington's defense outlays reach nearly 5%.

Obama's expression of concern during his meeting with Cameron is not the only evidence of mounting US discontent. In March, Samantha Power, US Ambassador to the United Nations, flew to Brussels to encourage the leaders of NATO countries to fulfill their 2% commitment. She warned that "the number of missions that require advanced militaries to contribute around the world is growing, not shrinking." In a subsequent interview on BBC Radio 4, Power conceded that "in most cases" not only was European defense spending inadequate, it was shrinking, despite the growth in security threats.

But US anger about an apparent lack of NATO burden sharing is nothing new. That frustration surfaced even during the earliest years of the Alliance. In 1954, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned that the United States might have to conduct an "agonizing reappraisal" of Washington's European security commitment if the allies didn't make a more serious effort. It was a hollow threat, though; the European allies concluded correctly that the United States

would never risk seeing the Continent come under Soviet domination. Consequently, allied free riding continued - as did periodic US complaints about that behavior.

Washington's impatience has become more noticeable in the years since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. US military spending nearly doubled during the following decade, while the outlays of NATO's European members continued the downward trajectory that existed since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the onset of the global Great Recession in 2007-2008 led to even sharper reductions in European defense efforts.

At a meeting of NATO defense ministers in February 2014, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel warned his European counterparts that they must step up their commitment to the Alliance or watch it become irrelevant. The current path of declining European defense budgets, he emphasized, "is not sustainable. Our alliance can endure only as long as we are willing to fight for it, and invest in it." Rebalancing NATO's "burden-sharing and capabilities," Hagel stressed, "is mandatory - not elective." The tone of his message was firm. "America's contributions in NATO remain starkly disproportionate, so adjustments in the US defense budget cannot become an excuse for further cuts in European defense spending."

Hagel's warning did little more than inspire yawns in response. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of secessionist forces in eastern Ukraine, however, have generated greater agitation among NATO's European members. The creation of a new and upgraded Rapid Reaction Force, with significant European participation, underscored growing worries about security - especially in Eastern Europe. Yet even in that region, the military actions have been relatively modest. Poland announced with great fanfare in February that it had earmarked 33.3 billion euros to upgrade its military forces. But the fine print in the announcement confirmed that the figure involved a spending increase parceled out over the coming decade. Moreover, even if future governments maintain that course, it would only bring Warsaw's defense budget up to the 2% level that it promised to achieve following the 2006 summit - some nine years ago. It is understandable if Washington's enthusiasm for the latest step is somewhat restrained.

There was similar fanfare accompanying Lithuania's self-congratulatory announcement that it was increasing its military spending by more than one-third. However, that change would bring the country's military budget barely up to 1% of GDP - still far below the long-standing 2% pledge.

The reality is that for all the professed concern (especially among NATO's East European members) about possible Russian aggression, there are still few signs that political leaders on the Continent are willing to back up their rhetoric with meaningful substantive action. Until there are dramatic increases in defense spending by Washington's alliance partners, it is difficult to take their expressions of alarm about the supposed Russian threat seriously. If the NATO powers will not boost their military outlays given the current, troubled regional security environment, one would be hard pressed to imagine a circumstance in which they would willingly do so.

Perhaps it is time for the United States finally to conduct Dulles's agonizing reappraisal. US officials may have to conclude that the only way to change the long-standing, frustrating dynamic is for the United States to make clear by actions - not just words - that it will no longer

tolerate European free riding on America's military exertions. That means gradually withdrawing all US ground forces from the Continent and drastically downsizing the presence of air and naval forces. It also means ending Washington's insistence on US domination of collective defense efforts through its leadership in NATO. Indeed, the United States needs to abandon its myopic opposition to the European Union developing an independent security capability.

The world has changed a great deal since the stark days of the early Cold War, when Washington felt compelled to defend a weak, demoralized democratic Europe from a powerful, menacing totalitarian adversary. The EU collectively now has a population larger than that of the United States and a larger economy as well. It is long past time for European countries to take responsibility for their own defense - and for the overall security of their region. Instead of perpetuating the futile rhetorical quest for burden sharing, US officials need to take substantive steps toward burden shifting.

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