

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Hagel's Futile Quest for NATO Burden Sharing

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

March 4, 2014

At a meeting of NATO defense ministers on February 26, 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](#) [3], 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 U.S. defense budget cannot become an excuse for further cuts in European defense spending.” [4]

Taken at face value, Hagel’s comments appeared to be an uncompromising demand for greater burden sharing by NATO’s European members. The speech would have been far more impressive and encouraging though, if previous U.S. officials had not made similar exhortations over the past six-and-a-half decades. Unfortunately, those calls proved futile, and in all likelihood Hagel’s effort will suffer a similar fate. European governments have never believed that Washington would drastically downgrade (much less terminate) its commitment to NATO, no matter how shamelessly the allies continue to free ride on U.S. military efforts.

The ink was barely dry on the treaty establishing NATO in 1949 before U.S. officials saw worrisome signs that Washington’s new alliance partners were shirking their share of the collective defense obligations. Secretary of State Dean Acheson assured uneasy senators that the West Europeans would provide the vast majority of armaments and manpower for the Alliance, making it unnecessary for the United States to station a large number of troops on the Continent. General Omar Bradley echoed Acheson’s assurances. The next year, however, Washington “temporarily” dispatched four divisions to Europe to augment the two divisions already stationed there as part of the post-World War II Allied occupation of Germany. U.S. officials concluded that the other NATO members were not yet prepared to provide enough forces for a credible defense in the increasingly tense global strategic environment resulting from the communist offensive in Korea.

Washington’s prodding for greater burden sharing continued, however. In NSC 82, the Truman administration formalized the decision to strengthen Europe’s defense by making the

“temporary” troop deployment permanent and bringing all NATO forces under U.S. command. But NSC 82 also insisted that those measures were not unconditional. “The United States should make it clear that it is now squarely up to the European signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty to provide the balance of forces required” for Western Europe’s defense. “Firm programs for the development of such forces should represent a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the above commitments on the part of the United States.”

The allies did promise to build more robust forces and to create a European Defense Community, including West German units, to coordinate those efforts. But little meaningful progress took place, as France and other countries dragged their feet about implementing the EDC. That behavior led Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, to warn the allies that the United States would have to conduct an “agonizing reappraisal” of its security commitment to Europe, if they didn’t make a more serious effort. France killed the EDC, however, and there was no agonizing reappraisal—or even a downsizing of the U.S. military presence in Europe. Indeed, U.S. officials soon went out of their way to assure the Europeans that Washington regarded their security as vital to America’s own.

Even when Congress weighed in to pressure the Europeans, most notably with the proposed Mansfield Amendment to reduce U.S. troop levels on the Continent, there was little movement toward greater burden sharing. Mansfield’s effort culminated in a May 1971 Senate vote on binding legislation that would have cut the U.S. deployment by 50 percent. Under tremendous pressure from the Nixon White House and zealous NATO supporters in the foreign policy community, the Senate rejected Mansfield’s proposal by a vote of 61-36.

That campaign against the Mansfield Amendment underscored a key reason why Washington’s Cold War burden-sharing admonitions invariably failed. Former Under Secretary of Defense Robert Komer candidly confirmed the problem in 1982 congressional testimony, stating that “U.S. threats” including “warnings that we’ll pull our troops out of Europe, never seem to work very well. The Europeans know that we need them as much as they need us.” But as Alan Tonelson, a scholar at the U.S. Business and Industry Council Educational Foundation and a long-time analyst of alliance issues, noted: “The main reason the European governments ‘knew’ that, of course, was because of the repeated assurances given by Komer and other U.S. officials” over the decades.[1]

Indeed, the conduct of the European allies seemed to reflect a belief that the United States needed Europe even more than Europe needed the United States. And if Washington’s alternating efforts of pleading with and warning its allies didn’t produce greater burden sharing during the Cold War, it is not surprising that subsequent efforts have failed. Despite the current tensions in Ukraine, Europe’s threat environment is far less menacing now than it was throughout the Cold War. Therefore, the incentive for the NATO allies to do more militarily has become even weaker.

Events over the past decade confirm that point. George W. Bush’s administration managed to wring a promise from the allies in 2006 that all NATO members would spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense. That commitment was already faltering even before the onset of the Great Recession caused severe economic problems. Today, few NATO members

fulfill the 2 percent pledge. Even such leading countries as Germany, Italy and Spain fail to do so, and Britain and France have now fallen dangerously close to that spending floor.

Given the long, depressing history of failed burden-sharing calls, there is little chance that Hagel's efforts will fare any better. The only way to change that dynamic is for the United States to make it clear by actions—not just words—that it will no longer tolerate European free riding on America's military exertions. That means withdrawing all U.S. ground forces from the Continent and drastically downsizing the presence of air and naval forces. It also means ending Washington's insistence on U.S. 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 the EU countries to take responsibility for their own defense—and for the overall security of their region. There is no justifiable reason for Washington to allow the European allies to remain free-riding security dependents of the United States. Instead of perpetuating the futile rhetorical quest for burden sharing, U.S. officials need to take substantive steps toward burden shifting.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor to The National Interest, is the author of nine books and the contributing editor of ten books on international affairs, including Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America, and NATO Enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*