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NATO's \$1 billion monument to irrelevance

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A Nov. 13 article in Reuters discusses the growing controversy over NATO's new headquarters being built outside Brussels. The price tag – some \$1 billion – has raised more than a few eyebrows.

“When defense budgets are being cut and in general when governments are under so much pressure from taxpayers to save money, it looks terribly extravagant,” opines Daniel Keohane, head of a leading think tank in Belgium. Several members of the British parliament also have questioned the cost.

NATO officials, though, defend the project, asserting that the existing headquarters, built in 1967, has outlived its usefulness. Of course, the same point could be made with far greater validity about the NATO alliance itself. After all, it was created during the depths of the Cold War in 1949 to, as Lord Harold Ismay, NATO's secretary general at the time, pithily observed, “keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

Given the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's manifold demographic, economic, and military limitations as a successor state, that mission now seems to be more than a little obsolete. The past two decades, the alliance has been conducting a frantic search for relevant new missions, resulting in a dubious decision to add members in Eastern Europe and wage even more dubious wars in places like Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Not only is NATO an alliance in search of purpose, but the willingness of the European members to free-ride on the military commitment of the United States to Europe's defense is now even worse than it was during the Cold War. The already anemic military budgets of NATO's European members have sagged further, and in some cases they are in virtual free fall. To build a billion-dollar, palatial headquarters under such circumstances exhibits contempt for taxpayers – especially U.S. taxpayers.

There seems to be a tendency of U.S. officials to endorse the building of expensive monuments to institutional egos at precisely the time that the institution in question has lost relevance. We saw that process take place in Iraq. Just as the nation-building mission was quickly heading south, the Bush administration built an embassy in Baghdad that was nearly as large as Vatican City. Today, it stands as a symbol of how badly Washington exaggerated the extent of America's

interests in Iraq and misconstrued the extent of U.S. influence there. With the construction of NATO's new headquarters, we have yet another monument to hubris.