

RealityChek

Our So-Called Foreign Policy: Why a Real America First European Security Policy is More Urgent than Ever

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September 21, 2019

Even if the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter wasn't one of my closest friends, I'd still be writing this post highlighting his op-ed piece earlier this week for the *Washington Post*. Because it absolutely decimates the claim that all that ails the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), America's oldest national security alliance, is recklessly mindless norms-buster Donald Trump.

Instead, Carpenter reports on overwhelming evidence that the arrangement, which since 1949 has committed the United States to the defense of first Western Europe and now most of Europe (and at considerable risk of nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland), is critically ill mainly because, in the decades since the end of the Cold War, U.S. and European interests have been steadily – and inevitably – diverging. And these findings add powerfully to the case that America's globalist military commitment to Europe has become dangerously outdated.

The evidence consists of polling data showing unmistakably that European publics no longer believe that their governments should side with the United States in its disputes and conflicts with Russia (whose perceived threat Western Europe's independence during its post-World War II decades as the Soviet Union sparked NATO's creation in the first place), or that they should even rally to each other's defense.

The Russia-focused results come from a September survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations, and are based on the views of no less than 60,000 individuals from fourteen countries belonging to the European Union (EU) – an economic organization not officially related to NATO but many of whose member countries are U.S. NATO allies as well.

The bottom line – which Carpenter rightly describes as “startling”? “When asked ‘Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and Russia?’ the majority of respondents in all 14 E.U. countries said ‘neither’.”

Some of the country-specific results?

“In France, only 18 percent would back the United States, while 63 percent opt for neutrality; in Italy, it's 17 percent vs. 65 percent, and in Germany, 12 percent to 70 percent.

“The results were similar even in NATO’s newer East European members, despite their greater exposure to Russian pressure and potential aggression. Hungarian respondents selected neutrality over supporting the United States 71 percent to 13 percent, while Romanians did so 65 percent to 17 percent. Even in Poland, a country whose history with Moscow during both the Czarist and Soviet periods was especially frosty, neutralist sentiment had the edge, 45 percent to 33 percent.”

What’s especially disturbing, and indeed outrageous, from an American standpoint is that since NATO’s founding, European governments have insisted that U.S. troops be stationed on the continent to serve (as in South Korea) in a trip-wire role – which *RealityChek* regulars knows means units deployed close enough to invasion routes and vulnerable enough to the superior conventional militaries of aggressors practically to force American Presidents to use nuclear weapons to save them if conflict breaks out.

This policy of “extended deterrence,” or “coupling,” has been intended to prevent such conflicts from breaking out in the first place. What’s dangerous for the United States of course – and needlessly so – is that if deterrence fails, nuclear weapons use could expose American territory to a retaliatory nuclear strike, even though the United States itself may not be at risk.

Even worse: Throughout the Cold War, NATO non-nuclear forces were inferior to their Soviet and Soviet satellite counterparts because the European allies preferred to free-ride on the U.S. military guarantee instead of spending funds they all could have afforded for armed forces capable of self-defense.

For good measure, moreover, this European Council on Foreign Relations poll showed that Europeans are just about as ambivalent in joining with the United States if a conflict with China broke out.

Of course, even though the lopsided nature of the results indicates that these European views have been long in the making, it’s not entirely crazy to believe that Mr. Trump’s election has been so alarming to these populations that the shift did actually begin with his 2016 victory. But as Carpenter points out, a survey from the Pew Research Center conducted in 2015 demonstrates that NATO’s core principles were in deep trouble in Europe well before the President even declared his candidacy for the Oval Office.

Pew sampled opinion in eight NATO members and found that 49 percent of respondents opposed their country coming to the defense of other allies. And majorities in key alliance members France, Italy, and Germany alike rejected “fulfilling their country’s obligation to fulfill the Article 5 treaty pledge to consider an attack on any NATO member as an attack on all.” Crucially, Article 5 of the NATO treaty embodies the notion of collective security. In other words, it literally makes NATO NATO.

Carpenter rightly concludes that “the concept of transatlantic solidarity, even on collective defense, is now largely confined to out-of-touch political elites on both sides of the Atlantic.” Just as important, he notes that “it will be hard to sustain policies that increasingly run counter to the wishes of popular majorities.”

Ironically, however, despite his harsh criticisms of NATO allies' free-riding and periodic swipes at the alliance as possibly obsolete, President Trump is increasingly acting like one of those out-of-touch globalist mainstays who urgently needs to see these poll results. For despite the warnings sounded by these polls that the United States won't be able to rely on the European governments and their militaries even if shooting breaks out in Europe, he's actually strengthened American forces on the continent – including in Poland, right on the Russian border.

In other words, an avowedly America First President is binding his country's fate to that of Europe at the very moment when disengagement is more important than ever.