



NATO Is An Institutional Dinosaur

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Editor's Note: Welcome to the fifth installment in our new series, "Course Correction," which features adapted articles from the Cato Institute's recently released book, Our Foreign Policy Choices: Rethinking America's Global Role. The articles in this series challenge the existing bipartisan foreign policy consensus and offer a different path.

Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has managed to gain unprecedented attention for stating in his usual flamboyant fashion something that many respected foreign policy analysts have maintained for years: that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an obsolete security arrangement created in a vastly different era to meet an entirely different security situation. Yet NATO partisans typically act as though the date on the calendar reads 1950 instead of 2016. They see Russia as nearly identical to the Soviet Union at the zenith of its military power and global ideological influence and regard democratic Europe as a helpless protectorate. Today, however, Russia is little more than a regional actor with limited ability to project power. And far from helpless, Europe's democratic nations have robust economies. As long as they continue to rely on America's military and its security guarantees, they will not divert financial resources from their preferred domestic welfare priorities to national defense.

A striking feature of analysts who echo former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's contention that the United States is the "indispensable nation" is the bland assumption that America must take primary (and often exclusive) responsibility for the defense of other regions. One popular proposal is to reverse the post-Cold War drawdown of U.S. forces stationed in Europe. Advocates also typically want to pre-position large quantities of sophisticated weaponry in the Baltic republics and along other points on Russia's western frontier so that the American military can ride to the rescue if Moscow engages in threatening behavior.

The notion of the United States as the indispensable nation is a manifestation of national narcissism that is especially pernicious with respect to Europe. The European Union now has both a population and an economy larger than the United States. Equally pertinent, the European Union has three times the population and a gross domestic product (GDP) some ten times that of Russia — the principal security concern of those countries. Even post-Brexit, that impressive strength will be diminished just modestly. Clearly, the European Union is capable of building whatever defenses might be necessary to deter Russian aggression — even granting the questionable assumption that Moscow harbors large-scale expansionist ambitions instead of just seeking to preserve a limited security zone along its borders. The European nations have not

done more to counter Russia because it has been easier for them to free-ride on America's security efforts.

The degree of allied free riding is breathtaking. At the NATO summit in 2006, the members committed to spending a minimum of two percent of GDP on the military and 20 percent of that spending on major equipment, including related research and development. But only the United States, Britain, Greece, and Estonia met that commitment prior to 2015 (and Greece did so only because of a perceived threat from fellow NATO member Turkey and a collapsing GDP). Moreover, only the United States, Britain, and Poland met both spending mandates in 2015. Several major NATO powers, including Germany, Italy, and Spain, have spending levels far below the 2 percent threshold. By comparison, the U.S. military's budget exceeds four percent of its GDP.

U.S. concern about a lack of NATO burden sharing is nothing new. In late 1953, 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. But Washington's frustration has become more noticeable in the years since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. U.S. military spending nearly doubled during the following decade, whereas the already anemic outlays of NATO's European members continued the downward trajectory that began with the end of the Cold War.

At a meeting of NATO defense ministers in February 2014, U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel warned his European counterparts that they must step up their commitment to the alliance or watch it become irrelevant. Declining European defense budgets, he emphasized, are "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." His tone 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."

Hagel's warning did little more than inspire yawns. 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 decision at the July 2016 NATO summit to station four battalions in the Baltic republics and Poland may have had more symbolic than actual military importance, but it did at least hint at greater seriousness.

Yet even in Eastern Europe, military exertions remain quite modest. Warsaw's defense budget just now reached the two percent level that it promised following the 2006 summit — some ten years ago. A great deal of self-congratulatory fanfare accompanied Lithuania's announcement that it was increasing its military spending by nearly one-third for 2016. However, that change would barely bring the country's military expenditures up to 1.4 percent of GDP — still far below the two percent pledge. The reality is that for all the professed concern about possible Russian aggression, political leaders in Europe show few signs they are willing to back up their rhetoric with meaningful action.

It is time for the United States finally to conduct Dulles's agonizing reappraisal. 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 free riding on America's military posture. That means, at the very least, gradually withdrawing all U.S. ground forces from Europe 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 NATO leadership. Indeed, the United States needs to abandon its myopic opposition to the European Union developing an independent security capability.

Policymakers need to take a hard look at NATO for two other reasons. First, allies are supposed to enhance America's security, but recent additions to NATO have done the opposite. Most of the newer members fall into two categories — the irrelevant and the dangerous. In the former category are countries like Montenegro, with a tiny population and economy and a minuscule military. How Montenegro is supposed to help the United States in the event of a military crisis is truly a mystery.

But at least Montenegro has few enemies and no great power enemies. The same cannot be said of the three Baltic republics, which are on bad terms with Russia. The only thing worse than committing the United States to defend a small, weak, largely useless ally is doing so when that ally is highly vulnerable to another major power. Yet that is what Washington has foolishly done with the Baltic republics. RAND analysts conclude that a concerted Russian attack would overrun the Baltic states in about 60 hours. That would leave the United States (as NATO's leader) with an ugly choice between a humiliating capitulation or a perilous escalation.

Worse, hawks in the United States advocate making defense commitments to Georgia and Ukraine, which are even more sensitive geographic locales to Russia. Alliances with such client states are perfect transmission belts to transform a local, limited conflict into a global showdown between nuclear-armed powers.

Second, although the United States likes to portray NATO as an alliance of liberal democracies, the reality is now murkier. There are disturbingly authoritarian trends in several NATO countries. Those trends are most pronounced in Turkey, which in the aftermath of July's abortive military coup has become a barely disguised dictatorship under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But authoritarian developments have also taken place in Hungary and to a lesser, but still worrisome, extent in Poland, where elected leaders are now cracking down on political opponents and undermining democratic institutions. Does America really want to risk its security to protect such allies, especially when it purports to lead an alliance of enlightened democracies?

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. It is long past time for European countries to take responsibility for their own defense — and for the overall security of their region. U.S. leaders should move beyond the usual futile rhetorical quest for burden sharing and take substantive steps toward burden shifting. Those steps must include reducing America's military presence in the region, especially ground forces, and preventing any further ill-considered expansion of the alliance.

But those are only the necessary first steps. At a more basic level, the United States needs to consider whether the Article 5 provision that an attack on one NATO member constitutes an attack on all really serves America's best interests any longer. Incurring risks, even grave risks, to protect a democratic and economic power center from a rapacious totalitarian adversary was one thing. To incur similar risks to protect marginal client states along the border of a second-tier regional power (which is today's Russia) is quite another. The justification for the latter is far less compelling.

Not only should policymakers revisit the wisdom of the Article 5 obligation, they need to consider whether American interests are best served by the United States remaining in the alliance at all. No foreign policy institution is sacred or permanent. NATO has had a very long run — nearly seven decades. It emerged victorious in the Cold War, and there is a compelling argument that it should have been given a dignified retirement on that occasion. It is time to rectify that error and promptly begin the multi-year process of transferring security responsibilities for the European region to a Europeans-only organization. That would prepare the way for a U.S. withdrawal from NATO if future American leaders decide such a step is appropriate.

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