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## What's really undermining NATO? Europe's yearning for neutrality.

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Most members of the United States' foreign policy establishment continue to regard NATO and the broader transatlantic relationship as the linchpin of Washington's global foreign policy. They have greeted President Trump's periodic demands for more burden-sharing from European allies and his dark hints that NATO might be obsolete with hostility bordering on hysteria. But Trump is not the main threat to transatlantic solidarity. A shift in European public opinion toward neutrality is sounding the real death knell.

A [new report](#) from the European Council on Foreign Relations contains a number of startling findings. The survey, covering 60,000 people in 14 European Union countries, suggests that the reasons for a sharp divergence in European and American perspectives on an array of foreign policy issues are wider and deeper than annoyance with Trump. That is evident even with regard to NATO's mission of standing up to Russia. 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."

A [response to the report](#) by Annabelle Timsit, a French American journalist, typifies the simplistic reaction from NATO partisans in both Europe and the United States. "Donald Trump has damaged America's standing in the world in his three years as president, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Europe," she writes. Timsit emphasizes the report's finding that Europeans "no longer believe that the US can serve as the guarantor of their security."

Yet she glosses over the breathtaking extent of neutralist sentiment among Washington's supposed security partners. 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.

Attitudes are no better regarding other foreign policy controversies involving the United States. When asked "Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and China?" the results were lopsided against backing America. Once again, Poland was most favorable, but this time with only 24 percent embracing Washington and 54 percent choosing neutrality. The pro-U.S. position was 19 percent in the Czech Republic, 17 percent in Romania

and 13 percent in Hungary. The outcome in the United States' long-standing economic and security partners in Western Europe was as bad or worse. Only 18 percent of French respondents, 20 percent of Italians and 10 percent of Germans chose solidarity with the United States.

Another finding confirms that Europeans now favor an independent foreign and security policy instead of continuing to be Washington's junior partner. The report summary concludes that respondents "want to see the European Union come of age as a geopolitical actor and chart its own course." Both public and governmental sentiment is building in favor of a "Europeans only" military force independent of NATO, with French President Emmanuel Macron leading the charge for that option.

The easy, intellectually lazy explanation is to blame Trump's abrasive, "isolationist" statements for the erosion of transatlantic solidarity. But that erosion was well underway before Trump emerged on the scene, and it applied even to NATO's core mission of collective defense. Judy Dempsey, a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe — a thoroughly establishment think tank — was alarmed by the results of a 2015 Pew Research Center survey of eight NATO countries. In particular, she noted the responses to Article 5, the core of NATO's commitment to collective defense, which requires members to defend an ally if it is attacked. The Pew poll, she wrote, "showed that among Europeans, a median of 49 percent of respondents thought their country should not defend an ally, a response that exposes a lack of commitment to collective defense." Indeed, France, Italy and Germany all had majorities *opposed* to 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.

The bottom line is 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. The interests and foreign policy views of the respective societies are diverging. Governmental elites may be able to ignore public opinion for a time, but it will be hard to sustain policies that increasingly run counter to the wishes of popular majorities. A death knell is sounding for NATO and the rest of the post-World War II transatlantic foreign policy system. Both the European Union and the United States will need to adjust to that new reality and pursue their own, independent policies.

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