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NATO As Nero: Alliance Postures While Europe Burns

NATO leaders are meeting in Chicago with a full agenda. It's the biggest NATO meeting ever, with some 60 governments in attendance. But no one is asking the most important question: why is America still defending Europe?

The North Atlantic Treaty Alliance once had an obvious purpose: to defend North Atlantic countries. More precisely, the U.S. was to protect everyone else. The war-ravaged western European states feared pressure, if not conquest, by the Soviet Union. NATO also helped tie a rearmed Germany to its neighbors.

The alliance finished its work on November 9, 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. Soon the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the Soviet Union disappeared.

There then ensued a desperate attempt to find a new role for the alliance. Some officials suggested that NATO could fight the illicit drug trade, promote the environment, or even aid student exchanges. Alliance advocates settled on engaging in "out-of-area" activities. That is, NATO abandoned its traditional role of defending its members and switched to pursuing social engineering around the globe, as well as acting as a tool to socialize former communist states.

One thing did not change. The U.S. continued to subsidize the defense of everyone else. NATO essentially stood for North America and The

Others. If anything was going to happen, it would have to be organized and paid for by Washington.

Even during the Cold War the Europeans would promise to increase military spending, only to waltz when budgets got tight. Once the threat from the Soviet Union dissipated so did the continent's heretofore modest interest in self-defense. Before he retired as Defense Secretary, Robert Gates complained that European military budgets "have been chronically starved for adequate funding for a long time, with the shortfalls compounding themselves each year."

The consequences have been grave. According to the group Notre Europe, the continent suffers "some alarming shortfalls in the areas of strategic transportation, communication, intelligence, logistics and satellites, requiring the implementation of costly reforms in terms of resources." Despite having 1.8 million men under arms, at most 100,000 of them "are equipped and sufficiently trained to be able to be deployed in crisis theaters."

Successive crises have driven down European military outlays. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has detailed cuts in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and others. Even Great Britain, which traditionally maintained the most serious European military with the greatest expeditionary capabilities, is dramatically cutting outlays and capabilities. James Russell of the Naval Postgraduate School complained: "The European countries have made a strategic-level to disarm essentially."

For years the Europeans talked of creating a continental military capability separate from NATO. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty was supposed to boost this process. However, the idea was stillborn. It's not much good having a Common Defense and Security Policy without the military necessary to back it up.

The problem was evident in 1999 when the allies bombed essentially defenseless Yugoslavia. America did most of the work since Europe was estimated to have barely 10 to 15 percent of U.S. combat capabilities.

Last year's intervention in the Libyan civil war was no better. It was supposed to be a European-led operation, but the Europeans took months to push the opposition to victory over the ragtag forces of Moammar Qaddafi.

Just eight NATO members contributed anything militarily; most contributions were minimal. Several countries ran short of munitions. According to the IISS: "the NATO air operations center in Italy managing the campaign had been designed to run 300 sorties a day, but was struggling to manage 150, about one-third the number flown over the much smaller Serbia/Kosovo theater in 1999." Washington was responsible for destroying anti-aircraft defenses, launching drone attacks, providing 80 percent of aerial refueling, and, of course, resupplying the Europeans when their weapon stocks ran low. "Europe is dead militarily," one general told Robert Kaplan of the Center for a New American Security.

However, for the Obama administration there is no looking back. America's NATO ambassador, Ivo Daalder, wants the alliance to go global. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently opined: "Of course, NATO is and always will be a transatlantic organization. But the problems we face today are not limited to one ocean and neither can our work be."

Where will the necessary forces come from? National Security Adviser Tom Donilon admitted: "We know that allies need more advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. They face shortages in helicopters and transport aircraft. They need to make greater investments in the precision munitions and unmanned systems that are critical on today's battlefields and will be even more important in the future." Last year only two of the other 27 NATO members devoted more than two percent of GDP to the military.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "We need to use this moment to make the case for the need to invest in this alliance, to ensure it remains relevant to the security challenges of the future." Similarly, NSA

Donilon noted that President Barack Obama was “asking the alliance to ensure that it has cutting-edge capabilities.”

Greece appears headed out of the European monetary union. Voters in France, Germany, and Italy have revolted against fiscal austerity. Britain’s economy has fallen back into recession. The government in the Netherlands collapsed with early elections to follow. The economic news in Spain continues to worsen. Who in Europe is going to spend more money to provide “cutting-edge capabilities”?

An embarrassed NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has proposed “smart defense,” which means “money spent more effectively. It is shared defense. It is efficient defense.”

Which in practice means NATO is going to remain North America and The Others. Washington will still be on call to meet European as opposed to American security needs, as in Libya.

With the end of any existential threat to Europe, NATO today only fights wars in which the members have no common interest. The Balkans conflicts were tragic, but had only minimal impact even on European alliance members. The status of the former Yugoslav republics was of no meaningful interest to America. Yet Washington essentially fought that war for the Europeans, who have since ruled Bosnia as colonial overlords and are attempting to force the ethnic Serb minority in Kosovo to submit to another artificial state based in Pristina.

The U.S. dragged the Europeans into a more than decade long war in Afghanistan against the wishes of the European peoples. They have little interest in establishing a modern, liberal democratic state in Central Asia. Which is why most European countries imposed “caveats”—an incredible 83 at the start—limiting their personnel’s exposure to combat.

The Europeans now all desperately want out. The Chicago summit was supposed to formalize a gradual withdrawal timetable. However, newly elected French President Francois Hollande promised to pull his

nation's 3300 troops out by the end of the year, though doing so may be logistically difficult. With the NATO military mission formally scheduled to last until the end of 2014, the Obama administration fears Paris's plan may spark a rush to the exit.

Britain and France returned the favor in Libya when they effectively got the rest of Europe and the U.S. to fight their war. Similar efforts are brewing to ensnare NATO—which means America—in Syria's civil war. For instance, the foreign minister of Belgium, which has all of 34,300 men under arms, recently pushed for debate over invading Syria to create "humanitarian corridors." Everyone knows who would be doing the bulk of the fighting, and it wouldn't be Belgium.

It brings to mind Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn's insistence last year that stopping Qaddafi "requires military action." The Grand Duchy had a population of less than a half million, no air force or navy, an army of 900 men, and a paramilitary gendarmerie of 612. Just whose military did Minister Asselborn expected to do the stopping?

Yet NATO expansion is in the air. In March Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), just defeated for reelection in his party's primary, and Rep. Michael Turner (R-Ohio) introduced the "NATO Enhancement Act" to extend the alliance. Unfortunately, NATO expansion adds security liabilities rather than military abilities.

Originally the alliance was created to protect Western Europe from the Soviet Union. Today no country is in a position to dominate Eurasia. The idea of an attack on western—or central—Europe is but a paranoid fantasy. Russia may be an unpleasant neighbor, but it has reverted to pre-1914 great power mode. Moscow wants secure borders and international respect. Florid threats to preempt a missile defense system to the contrary, even Vladimir Putin at his most aggressive isn't likely dreaming of a revived Red Army marching down the Unter den Linden in Berlin or Champs-Elysees in Paris.

If there is genuine danger of Russian military action, it is in the east, precisely where NATO is expanding. However, these areas were part of or dominated by both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. America still has an interest in the liberated states' development into vibrant democracies, but that does not warrant potential war with a nuclear-armed power.

Morgan Lorraine Roach and Luke Coffey of the Heritage Foundation argue that adding new members "is critical to mobilizing Europe and its allies around a collective transatlantic defense." But look at the list of potential new members.

The top tier of aspirants, endorsed by Sen. Lugar's legislation, holds Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an artificial country ruled by the European Union's "High Representative." Bosnia exists only because Western military intervention forced Serbs and Croats to remain in a territory dominated by Bosniaks. There is little more unity today than in 1995 when Bosnia was established by the Dayton Accords. Bosnia's internal tensions—Serbs in the Republic Srpska continue to strongly resist "national" rule—would become an American problem with NATO membership. The IISS describes the Bosnian armed forces as "an uneasy amalgam of troops from all three formerly warring entities." Bringing such an entity into NATO would be little short of madness.

Adding Georgia would be even more foolish. Tbilisi desperately wants to join NATO, but has a very bad relationship with Russia, with which it fought a brief war in August 2008. Georgia's human rights record remains "uneven," according to Human Rights Watch. Indeed, Freedom House reports "electoral problems such as the abuse of state resources, reports of intimidation aimed at public employees and opposition activists, and apparent voter-list inaccuracies."

Worse, President Mikhail Saakashvili started the 2008 conflict by attacking Russian forces in the breakaway territory of South

Ossetia. Many suspect that he did so because he expected Western support. The Georgian people deserve to be free and secure, but not at the risk of war for America. For Moscow border security is a vital interest: imagine America's reaction if Russia forged a seemingly hostile military alliance with Mexico.

Macedonia also wants in but has been blocked by Greece in a dispute over the former's name, which refers to territory included within the latter's boundaries. Macedonia also has been caught in the riptide of Albanian nationalism, barely avoiding a destructive civil war like that in Kosovo. Freedom House warned that "poor relations between the Macedonian Slav majority and the ethnic Albanian minority have raised doubts about the country's long-term viability." Last year the International Crisis Group cited "rising ethnic Macedonian nationalism, state capture by the prime minister and his party, decline in media and judicial independence, increased segregation in schools and slow decentralization" which "risk undermining the multi-ethnic civil state Macedonia can become." With a military of just 8000 Macedonia would add little to the alliance.

Montenegro is much the same, only it has an even smaller armed forces and closer economic relationship with Russia, the chief target of NATO. Montenegro also managed to achieve a peaceful separation from Yugoslavia and avoided being pulled into the violent whirlpool of Albanian separatism next door. But there is no reason to add it as a new American defense client.

Kosovo, Serbia, and Ukraine are on some lists as well.

Kosovo is another artificial state born of war with allied military support. Kosovo has been recognized only by about half of the world's states. It remains under allied occupation without a formal military. Its government contains men charged with criminal involvement and war crimes; corruption and human rights remain problems. The European Commission acknowledged that "public administration reform in Kosovo remains a major challenge." The north of Kosovo, with an

ethnic-Serb majority, continues to maintain a separate existence with close links to Belgrade.

Another candidate is Serbia, which NATO countries bombed for 78 days in 1999. Now Belgrade wants to join the onetime aggressors. However, Serbia continues to refuse to recognize Kosovo—a perfectly reasonable decision, but one in conflict with the policy of most NATO members. And while the Serbian military is larger than Montenegro's, it would require bountiful American subsidies to bring it up to alliance standards.

Ukraine also has its supporters, though a majority of Ukrainians oppose the idea and the Yanukovich government is in very bad odor in the West. Kiev is capable of deterring an attack from Russia. Moreover, adding Ukraine would further poison relations with Moscow, appearing as part of an American-inspired effort at encirclement. NATO membership also would make Ukraine's disputes with Russia America's disputes.

Advocates of NATO expansion treat security guarantees as hotel chocolates to be placed on every nation's pillow, irrespective of America's national interests. The U.S. has nothing at stake which warrants the expense necessary to upgrade the alliance aspirants' militaries or the risk of going to war for them against a nuclear-armed power. Adding these nations would not fulfill the most basic purpose of any alliance: to enhance America's security.

Of course, while war with Moscow is unlikely, it remains possible. As Kaplan argued, it would be wrong to assume "that Europe will face no geopolitical nightmares in its future." However, this argues against moving NATO further eastward. For Russia border security is a vital concern. Four years ago Russia demonstrated its willingness to defend those interests with military force, if necessary. The deterioration in that nation's conventional forces means that Moscow would be forced to rely on nuclear weapons as the ultimate equalizer in any confrontation with the West. Warned Gen. Nikolai Makarov, chief of the Russian General Staff: "In certain conditions, I do not rule out local and regional

armed conflicts developing into a large-scale war, including using nuclear weapons.”

Europe still should be defended. But by Europeans.

Before the Chicago summit former U.S. NATO ambassador Kurt Volker complained about “things that are not on the agenda that are the most important issues.” He pointed to Syria, Iran, and the Arab Spring, none of which NATO could—or should—do much about. But one important issue was left off the agenda: NATO’s future.

Last June Secretary Gates predicted “a dim if not dismal future” for the alliance. He warned “that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress — and in the American body politic writ large — to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.” Last October Gates’ successor, Leon Panetta, was only slightly less blunt: “legitimate questions about whether, if present trends continue, NATO will again be able to sustain the kind of operations that we have seen in Libya and Afghanistan without the United States taking on even more of the burden.”

Of course, the answer obviously was no, and nothing decided in Chicago will change it.

To coin a phrase, it is time for a change. Washington once opposed an independent European defense. Now the U.S. should insist on it. Or rather—since it is not America’s place to decide Europe’s future for Europe—should adopt policies likely to lead to that result. Washington should bring home the 80,000 troops which remain in Europe and announce that it will be formally leaving NATO after a “decent interval.” The Europeans could use the existing alliance structure to organize continental military affairs, perhaps in cooperation with the European Union. (Albania, Croatia, Iceland, and Turkey are not currently EU members, but Croatia is slated to join next year and the others are candidates for membership; Canada is the only true outlier.)

The U.S. should not “leave” Europe but forge a less formal cooperative relationship including intelligence sharing, joint maneuvers, and mutual base access. In the rare case where military action served both America and Europe, such as confronting Somali piracy, they should act together. In the unlikely case of an uncontrollable hegemonic threat against Europe—which currently enjoys about ten times the GDP and more than three times the population of Russia—the U.S. could intervene. However, normal responsibility for protecting Europe and ensuring security in adjoining regions would be left to Europe.

Retrenchment is necessary to better defend the U.S. Washington should not entangle America’s future in geopolitical controversies of no concern to the U.S. At a time of fiscal stringency Washington cannot afford to continue to protect America’s prosperous and populous allies. And the only way they will do more for themselves is if the U.S. does less for them. Welfare dependency is not only a domestic problem.

NATO played an important role during the Cold War. The collapse of communism and the Soviet Union have eliminated its *raison d’être*. Even NATO admits that the alliance’s “value is less obvious to many than in the past.”

Instead of desperately concocting new missions for an old alliance, the U.S. should applaud NATO’s success and turn the organization over to the Europeans. America no longer need protect a continent that is both richer and more populous than our own nation.