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France takes notice, the Yanks aren't coming

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Europe is slowly disarming. Yet the continent no longer can rely on America to fill the gap. That realization has given France pause. Other European states also may start taking their security responsibilities more seriously.

The Europeans have been cutting military spending for years. EU leaders still might talk about creating a continental foreign policy and military, but European peoples exhibit little interest in paying the resulting bill.

Earlier this year NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that “There is a lower limit on how little we can spend on defense.” But what is it?

Europe may be moving toward eventual disarmament, but a slight sign of hope is flickering in France. Although modern French presidents don't look much like reincarnations of Emperor Napoleon, they are not shrinking violets internationally, recently fighting wars in Libya and Mali. However, in both cases Paris required assistance, primarily from America.

Europe's rising enthusiasm for war is ironic. Observed Philip Stephens in the Financial Times: “Europeans have caught the interventionist bug just as the U.S. has shaken it off.”

However, France's financial difficulties created pressure for additional cuts in military outlays. The Hollande government recently released its defense review, known as the *Livre Blanc* (White Book). Although the government reduced its rapid deployment forces, it “opted to keep France's air, ground and sea capabilities, while freezing defense budgets over six years,” noted the Economist.

Outlays will shrink in real terms and as a percentage of GDP, but “Dark talk of the loss of 50,000 jobs proved unfounded. Planned yearly cuts will be smaller than under ... Nicolas Sarkozy. France will maintain its capability for expeditionary warfare, and boost special forces.”

Although opposition legislators complained that the proposed force was inadequate for France to act alone, a budget increase was inconceivable in today's economic climate. Still, Paris apparently realized that if it is going to continue to be a “global nation,” it no longer could expect as much help from across the Atlantic.

As the French White Paper delicately put it, Americans will “prove more selective in their overseas engagements.” This led what the Economist termed “the recognition that France may have to step up militarily in the Mediterranean and Africa.”

That requires not just sufficient forces but the right forces. Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called some of his nation's deficiencies "incomprehensible," requiring Paris to spend more on aerial refueling and intelligence, for instance.

Explained Francois Heisbourg of the Foundation for Strategic Research: "Planning to operate in a world where the Americans will be in only a supporting role changes everything. It is essential that we get the right kit to do it."

It long has been obvious that Washington's promise to protect prosperous and populous allies created a disincentive for them to do more for their own defense. During the Cold War the Europeans routinely violated their promises to hike military expenditures, even in the face of the numerically superior Red Army.

Japan kept military ("self-defense") outlays below 1 percent of GDP. Since the mid-1990s South Korea has skimmed on its armed forces budgets while providing the North with \$10 billion worth of assistance as part of the Sunshine Policy — even as North Korea threatened to turn Seoul into a "lake of fire."

American officials were reluctant to intervene in Libya and have even less enthusiasm about joining the Syrian civil war. As the U.S. further reduces capabilities, even Paris realizes that Washington might say no to its next war proposal.

U.S. policymakers should learn from this experience. Instead of bashing the Europeans, insisting that they spend more when they see no compelling reason to do so, Washington should simply shed the burden of Europe's defense. Inform America's long-time friends and allies that the cheap ride is over. Then the Europeans can decide how much to spend to defend what and bear the consequences.

Whether the issue is Kosovo, Libya, Georgia or Syria, absent a compelling interest for America, military action should be up to Brussels, or Paris, London, and Berlin. There's still value in security cooperation. And Washington obviously could help the Europeans become militarily self-sufficient. But the time for a U.S.-dominated alliance is over.

Economists long have said that incentives matter. France's behavior proves that they do. When Paris believed that it could rely on Uncle Sucker, the former did one thing. When France realized that the Yanks really might not be coming, it did something different. Washington should send the same message to the rest of its defense dependents.