



NATO Is a Luxury Good the United States Doesn't Need

Europe is capable of defending itself.

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For decades, the most widely held belief in the Washington foreign-policy establishment has been that NATO is tremendously valuable to the United States. As former U.S. diplomat William Burns wrote in his memoir, even the expansion of the alliance “stayed on autopilot as a matter of U.S. policy, long after its fundamental assumptions should have been reassessed. Commitments originally meant to reflect interests morphed into interests themselves.” Being a NATO skeptic in Washington is like being a middle-aged white guy at a Bad Bunny concert. On both counts, take it from me: You feel out of place.

As Burns suggests, one thing that happens with unexamined consensus is that arguments in its favor fail to be sharpened by contact with their opponents. Kathleen J. McInnis has thankfully stepped into the breach, offering *Foreign Policy* readers an argument that Americans still need NATO.

Her essay argues forcefully that NATO is the taproot of the “enormous economic prosperity and freedom” that Americans enjoy. Not only prosperity and freedom, though: Providing security for Europeans “allows the United States to set the international security agenda,” enhances U.S. credibility in Asia, helped facilitate Washington’s post-9/11 wars, helps handle “anti-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa ... China, climate change, and advanced disruptive technologies” in addition to “disinformation operations, pandemic response, migration, and terrorism.”

Whew.

Some of us might argue that lubricating U.S. operations in the greater Middle East after 9/11 was a bad thing—given that the missions themselves were mostly bad. The United States squandered \$8 trillion, thousands of lives, and almost two decades of attention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Anything that made that easier should be tallied as a debit, not a credit.

But there’s a bigger problem. NATO isn’t about pandemic response or anti-piracy. It has no capabilities, no authority, and no fitness for these purposes. NATO is an old-fashioned military

alliance. However big a problem migration or disinformation may be, the alliance wasn't designed and still isn't tailored for dealing with them.

These problems aren't just missing from the North Atlantic Treaty; they appear only as marketing in more recent official documents, including NATO's just-issued Strategic Concept. NATO is sold—and sells itself—as many things, but it is, by treaty and by the structure of its bureaucracy, a military alliance dedicated to the security of its members.

Given NATO's origins as a military alliance aimed at deterring Soviet aggression, we should ask ourselves: With the Soviets out and the Germans down, why did the United States struggle so mightily to stay in after the Cold War? The answer is simple: NATO is, and always has been, a vehicle for maintaining the United States as the dominant security player in Europe. That there were sharper disagreements about this idea in the 1950s than there are today speaks volumes about the lack of debate in today's Washington.

Even the Rand Corp. report that McInnis cites in support of the idea of “defense in depth” in Europe remarks that U.S. leaders only adopted the concept grudgingly out of fear that “U.S. allies were too weak to contain the Soviet Union on their own.” As that report observes, the four divisions Congress agreed to send to Germany in 1950 “were not intended to remain there indefinitely; instead, the U.S. troops were to be withdrawn when Western Europe had recovered sufficiently to field its own conventional deterrent.”

Western Europe had recovered sufficiently to field its own conventional deterrent less than a decade later. By 1959, a memo described U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower as lamenting: “The Europeans now attempt to consider this deployment as a permanent and definite commitment. We are carrying practically the whole weight of the strategic deterrent force, also conducting space activities, and atomic programs. We paid for most of the infrastructure, and maintain large air and naval forces as well as six divisions. He thinks the Europeans are close to ‘making a sucker out of Uncle Sam’; so long as they could prove a need for emergency help, that was one thing. But that time has passed.”

Does the United States need to remain the main provider of security in Europe forever? Recent developments in Europe, spurred by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggest it doesn't. Germany's Zeitenwende—officially translated as “watershed” but something more like “new era”—was almost unthinkable six months ago. Berlin didn't just cancel the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (analysts had worried it might not) but also established a 100 billion euro (\$107 billion) fund to bolster its defense and committed itself thereafter to spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense. Poland and several other states made similar pledges to increase spending.

But as political scientist Barry Posen remarked at a recent Cato Institute panel, there is reason to worry these pledges won't materialize. The United States has rushed into the breach, sending 20,000 additional U.S. troops to Europe to reassure NATO allies. The downside of reassurance is that when you reassure enough, your allies are likely to believe you and may not step up and do more for their own defense. It seems likely that the Europeans, confident behind Captain America's shield, will go back to business as usual in Europe. For example, as Jennifer Lind's work on Japan shows, Japan did relatively more for its own defense only when it feared the

United States might do less. In this case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine provided shock therapy for European threat assessments. Restoring the United States as Europe's pacifier may restore indifference and inaction.

In 2022, U.S. allies are not too weak to contain Russia on their own. They simply refuse to do so out of the well-founded belief that the United States will do so for them, and accordingly their people would benefit from spending their own tax dollars on domestic priorities.

The United States cannot maintain its role as the cornerstone of European security while successfully competing with a growing China forever. And the cheap-riding that afflicts the U.S. alliance in Europe also addles its alliances in Asia.

Panegyrics to the trans-Atlantic community are still in vogue in Washington because they are seen as cheap. They aren't. Resource constraints are beginning to bite. The defense budget, already bloated at \$847 billion, is not headed to \$1 trillion and above anytime soon. Maintaining U.S. domination of the European security scene is a luxury good the United States doesn't need in 2022. The United States fought two wars to prevent a European hegemon from emerging in the 20th century. There is no potential European hegemon on or even over the horizon at the present. For all Russia's bluster, it's struggling to take even part of a much smaller, poorer neighbor—let alone hold it. It's time to take the win.

For those reasons, advocates of NATO as a permanent alliance should probably start thinking about Plan B, not advertising the alliance as a cure-all for problems including climate change, piracy, and disinformation. Europe is rich and strong enough to defend itself. But the Europeans won't do so unless the United States stops doing it for them.

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