

# WAR ON | THE | ROCKS

## Make European Defense European

Justin Logan

June 10, 2021

In the lead-up to the NATO summit next week, everything is normal at alliance headquarters in Brussels. The secretary-general is delivering talking points on alliance unity, openness, and the rules-based international order. Meanwhile, France and Turkey are at each other's throats in the Mediterranean, the prospect of granting Ukraine and Georgia a membership action plan remains a distant fantasy, and reports have reemerged of the United States working with Denmark to spy on Germany and France.

In the case of today's NATO, it's cruel to be kind — far better to square up to reality. And the reality is that the United States invests too much in European security, while its European allies invest too little. Turning NATO into a European defense alliance for the purpose of European defense would serve the interests of both Europe and the United States.

Washington doesn't have to simply pull up stakes and walk away from Europe impulsively. There are modest steps it could begin taking today. For example, Washington could push for the next supreme allied commander in Europe to be a European. Historically, the position has always been staffed by an American. It should also consider withdrawing some U.S. troops, as a spur to action. A large plurality of Germans supported former President Donald Trump's proposal to withdraw 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany, despite the policy's association with Trump. Expensive and unnecessary commitments were one thing in the 1990s. They are another matter in 2021.

### Europe and the U.S. National Interest

Presently, the alliance is winding down a 20-year mission in Afghanistan, following out the United States just the same as it followed that country in. Troops from NATO countries fought and died alongside Americans, but for the last decade-plus of the war, it has been a strictly mercenary mission for many partners. As Polish President Andrzej Duda put it on a 2018 visit to Polish troops there, their presence in Afghanistan “contributed to the fact that today ... US troops are also in our country at a time when our neighbor [Russia] is once again implementing his imperial ambitions.” The value for Poland in this exchange is obvious. The benefit for Americans seems less clear cut.

In an era of French criticism and German impotence, America's trans-Atlanticists regularly offer the newer NATO members' enthusiasm as evidence of the vitality of the alliance. The problem is that the newer members are need factories. The Romanian president recently complained that his

country needs more NATO troops, and aspiring Romanias like Ukraine are complaining that they aren't invited to the NATO summit. Geography is a cruel master, but it rules us all. Being a relatively small, weak neighbor of Russia leaves such states with limited options in international politics.

But just as the mission in Afghanistan crept, some scholars are beginning to suggest that NATO go out of area — *way* out of area. Judging that the Russian threat was “largely under control,” Sara Bjerg Moller recommended pointing NATO at China instead. A Bundeswehr official suggested that Germany could maintain U.S. interest in European defense by offering a militarily trivial naval presence to the U.S. effort to confront China. Just as every defense program in Washington has become suddenly about China, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg promised “much more language on China than we have ever had before” in the statement that will be issued at the 2021 summit.

One potential problem here is that repurposing NATO as an anti-China alliance lacks popular support. Eighty-two percent of German and 68 percent of British respondents in 2020 said that “If there is a new US-Chinese cold war,” their country should remain neutral. (Also, it seems like there are big issues with the existing name, history, structure, interests, and geography.)

Instead of keeping the United States at the center of European security policy while Europeans send a token force to the South China Sea, Washington should devolve the task of European security to NATO's European members.

Suggesting that NATO should be transformed into a European alliance for securing Europe implies that it can do so, of course. There is a scholarly debate on the subject, but the fact that there is even discussion of whether Europe — with an economy more than nine times larger than Russia's and three and a half times the Russian population — can defend itself against Russia speaks volumes on the extent to which the United States has infantilized Europe. European states — and the European Union — have made defense decisions from behind Captain America's shield. Remove the shield, and you will likely get different decisions.

### **Europe Without the United States: Back to the Future?**

Making any policy judgment involves uncertainty and counterfactuals, but skeptics about European autonomy should make perfectly clear: Which security scenario does American dominance of European defense really foreclose? German territorial expansionism? The parlous state of the German military and the nuclear arsenals of France and the United Kingdom would seem to preclude the possibility. A Russian conquest of Germany? The idea seems similarly fanciful and carries immensely high risks and dubious payoffs for a Putin government that seems clearly oriented to power realities. A unified Europe that establishes a bloc from which the United States would be excluded? To what end? Even engaging with these arguments feels like burning straw men. There just isn't much menacing the continent's major powers. And if nothing menaces its major powers, there isn't much at stake for U.S. national security.

If we remember Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay — NATO's first secretary-general — and his well-known remark that NATO's founding mission was to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down, American immovability begins to make more sense. The United States has doggedly opposed the creation of a third force in Europe, whether German, European, or otherwise. The question becomes: If there is no need to keep the Germans — or European

defense cooperation — down, what need is there to keep the Americans in? Particularly in an era of scarce resources and growing needs elsewhere?

Last December, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley suggested there should be a “holistic review of the disposition of the force and the tasking purposes of all of the forces worldwide. There’s a very strong argument to be made that we may have forces in places that they shouldn’t be.” In February, the Biden administration took up this task, announcing a global posture review. As it concludes that report, the Pentagon will likely come to the unhappy conclusion that freeing up resources for competition with China entails giving up big-ticket items elsewhere.

### **Looking Ahead**

America’s self-appointed roles as European pacifier, Middle East policeman, and Asian great-power competitor are becoming too heavy to carry at the same time. Strategy is about choice. The unipolar era allowed the United States largely to avoid choice for decades, but U.S. defense budgets are flattening and the pressures of international politics are reemerging. The easiest place to divest American burdens should be Europe. The question for policymakers is whether they start a gradual process of replacing American leadership with European leadership, or whether they will wait until a crisis occurs, when airy assumptions and lax planning collapse under strain. A number of scholars argued for handing Europe off to the Europeans in the 1990s. The intervening years should have made clear that Europe’s wholeness and freedom do not require U.S. boots on the ground. Europe’s major powers are unlikely to attack one another and can defend themselves against Russia. The United States should be a friend to Europe, not its pacifier.

*Justin Logan (@justintlogan) is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.*