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Blank Checks

by Doug Bandow

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Leading Europeans have long promoted the idea of an independent European foreign policy and military force. Creating such a continental capability is one of the top arguments for strengthening the European Union through the Lisbon Treaty. In practice, however, Europe is moving in the opposite direction as individual nations reduce their militaries and commitments. On Bastille Day, French President Nicolas Sarkozy presided over a military parade that included German and Indian military personnel. Sarkozy has brought Paris back into the NATO command structure, opened a base in the Persian Gulf, and promised military “modernization” and high-tech development. He also has proposed establishing a “permanent and autonomous strategic planning capacity” for the EU along with a deployable military force. But France is about the only European state intent on increasing its military reach—and only after sharply reducing its defense efforts since the end of the cold war.

Throughout history, Great Britain has been America’s closest military partner. The government recently announced a review of British defense policy, shortly after the Institute for Public Policy Research predicted significant cuts in London’s defense budget of roughly \$54 billion.

One potential target is the planned \$124 billion replacement program for Britain’s sea-based Trident nuclear-missile program. Earlier this year three top retired military officers proposed dropping Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has suggested reducing British nuclear weapons as part of international negotiations.

Also under scrutiny is London’s contribution to the Afghanistan war. Rising casualties are taxing public patience. The economic crisis is increasing calls for cutbacks. The Royal United Services Institute recently proposed “a radical scaling back” of the British contingent. Britain can, explained the Institute:

plausibly argue it is contributing much more than any other US ally to the Afghanistan operation. Given this, the US ‘surge’ into Helmand and Kandahar provinces could be used to relieve the pressure for further increases in the UK’s own forces.

Prime Minister Brown has resolved “to complete the work that we have started in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” However, with elections due by mid-2010, even Brown’s Labour Party might feel forced to retreat. In any case, the opposition Conservatives are likely to take power next year and what would happen then is unclear. One Tory MP says: “The death toll means we should do it properly or we shouldn’t to it all.”

The *Financial Times* reports that:

An increasingly heated British debate about its role in Afghanistan has sparked concern in Washington about the sustainability of the military strategy and the US public’s own willingness to commit troops for the long term, senior officials and analysts say.

American officials say they wouldn’t be surprised at such controversy in Germany, but Great Britain is different. Bruce Riedel, a Brookings Institute scholar who ran the Obama administration’s review

of Afghanistan policy, admitted: “The British are crucial to the NATO mission in Afghanistan” and that U.S. “public opinion will be affected negatively against the war if our key ally in Helmand starts to look for a path out.”

A British withdrawal would be particularly bad news for Washington, since Britain is one of the few countries providing meaningful assistance in Afghanistan. Although many NATO members have contributed forces, only Britain, Canada and the Netherlands have not added “caveats” restricting the use of their contingents. Even under U.S. pressure, it took eighteen months to negotiate the total number of caveats down from eighty-three to seventy. Complains General John Craddock, the outgoing NATO SACEUR, or supreme commander in Europe: “There are restrictions at every level.” No wonder American personnel joke that ISAF, officially the International Security Assistance Force, really stands for “I saw Americans fight.”

Germany is one of the worst. It has insisted on sending its troops to the relatively secure north, in order to keep them out of combat. Reports the London *Times*: “Now Germany’s battered military reputation has received a further humiliating blow. According to official reports the three thousand five hundred troops in northern Afghanistan drink too much and are too fat to fight.” We can all be happy that Berlin’s war-mongering past is over, but it is unfortunate that Europe’s most populous and prosperous nation is unwilling to do more to promote international security.

None of this is likely to change, whether or not Irish voters ratify the Lisbon Treaty in October. “Old” Europe has pretensions of global leadership but is unwilling to devote the resources necessary to create a corresponding continental military. Most Europeans see no threats to justify such expenditures. “New” Europe is more concerned about military issues, principally containing Russia, but lacks the capacity to make a significant military contribution. Incorporating countries like Albania and Croatia has turned NATO expansion into a farce.

But both parts of Europe have one thing in common: They continue to look to the United States for a de facto bailout.

Washington’s policy inevitably encourages European dependency. American officials have resisted creation of an independent continental military out of fear that it would encourage the Europeans to act separately from the United States. Washington typically offers verbal support for strengthening EU capabilities, but in practice expects any increase to be put to American ends. Some analysts fear any growth of European autonomy. For instance, Sally McNamara of the Heritage Foundation criticizes Ivo Daalder, America’s new ambassador to NATO, for advocating a “Europe-first policy” which

would essentially create a back door for America’s withdrawal from the European continent in figurative, and possibly, real terms. Neither the EU nor any single European nation is capable of stepping into the breach this withdrawal would create, leaving a dangerous power vacuum with unpredictable outcomes.

It’s hard to imagine Daalder, who is well within the policy mainstream, pushing America’s withdrawal from Europe, but Representatives Michael Turner and Jim Marshall appear to fear an imminent American retreat from the continent. They have introduced the NATO First Act, which would attempt to make permanent America’s existing base structure across Europe. Although the secretary of defense could close a facility after determining that it was unnecessary (why else would he shut down a base?), he would have to report to Congress on the impact on NATO’s Article V guarantee to the other twenty-seven alliance members.

The bill also would increase money for NATO members, further subsidize alliance applicants, fund missile defense and ban any reduction in nuclear forces in order to maintain extended deterrence. McNamara advocates going even further, having Congress “insert a one year’s notification requirement for any base closure, troop withdrawals, or changes to U.S. forward-deployed nuclear forces,” allowing legislators to block any adjustment to American military deployments.

Although Turner and Marshall want to put NATO first, Washington's principal goal should be protecting America, not Europe. True, the press release advancing the bill declared:

By building a robust, integrated U.S. and allied security framework in Europe, the NATO First Act will bolster common defenses, protect the United States homeland, and strengthen an alliance that has ensured peace and stability in Europe for over 60 years.

That all sounds nice, but NATO has little to do with America's defense these days. America protects Europe against largely phantom threats. European states play act as a global power while starving their militaries in order to maintain generous welfare states. The Europeans won't even do more to protect the eastern reaches of their own continent. Washington is supposed to do all the heavy lifting. Europe apparently believes its job is to help "supervise." Nothing will change until the U.S. stops allowing Europeans to enjoy a cheap if not quite free ride.

During the cold war America could ill afford to allow the Soviet Union to dominate Europe. NATO had a clear mission that warranted Washington's promise to go to war. Two decades ago aggressive, hegemonic communism disappeared as an international force. The principal purpose of the transatlantic alliance also disappeared.

No adequate substitute mission has emerged. McNamara contends that "Europe is not a sea of tranquility and faces geopolitical and asymmetric challenges, including a resurgent Russia, missile proliferation, and Islamist extremism." However, none of these offers anything akin to the Red Army backed by a huge nuclear missile arsenal poised along the Iron Curtain with the seeming threat to sweep to the Atlantic.

Moreover, McNamara ignores Europe's capabilities. The European Union's GDP is bigger than America's and exceeds Russia's by a factor of ten. Why Americans should continue subsidizing the defense of their richer trans-Atlantic neighbors is difficult to understand. After spending sixty years enjoying a cheap ride courtesy of Washington, it would seem fairer for Europe to start subsidizing America's defense.

Missile proliferation is a problem, but one that warrants cooperation rather than alliance commitments. The Europeans should decide on the defenses they desire and pay accordingly. There is no cause for the United States to lobby the continent to defend itself, offering financial benefits or additional security guarantees to win the Europeans' cooperation. Especially when Europe continues to presume that it enjoys the protection of America's nuclear umbrella, the continent should pay for its own missile defense.

As for Islamic extremism, there is precious little that a military alliance can do. Is anyone contemplating NATO air strikes against Paris suburbs dominated by Muslim immigrants from North Africa? The challenge facing Europe grows out of large-scale Islamic immigration mixed with limited social integration. On these issues America can't even offer good advice, since it has little relevant experience. There is much to be gained from cooperation against extremism and terrorism, but that cooperation would continue irrespective of the status of NATO.

While Nicolas Sarkozy wants a bigger European military to turn the continent into a *Weltmacht* of sorts, there is little popular support for any kind of military buildup. Europeans perceive few serious security threats and have even less interest in backing Washington's active global agenda. As a result, analysts like McNamara might dream of NATO as "an intergovernmental values-based alliance" that offers "America additional security options" and which operates "successfully in non-NATO theaters of war, such as Iraq." But such a program exists only in the realm of fantasy. Just look at NATO in Afghanistan to see what out-of-area transatlantic cooperation means in the best case.

Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace also believes in a faith-based foreign policy. He makes the astonishing claim that slowing America's increase in military

spending—up three-quarters after inflation since 2001—

would make it harder to press allies to do more. The Obama administration rightly plans to encourage European allies to increase defense capabilities so they can more equitably share the burden of global commitments. This will be a tough sell if the United States is cutting its own defense budget.

Kagan must be an incurable optimist. The Europeans resisted U.S. pressure to expand their defense capabilities even during the cold war and routinely violated specific pledges to increase military outlays. British Defense Secretary John Hutton has spoken of “A legacy of underinvestment by some European member states in their armed forces, significant variance in political commitment to the campaign, and underneath it all a continued overreliance on the U.S. to do the heavy lifting.” As long as America does, the Europeans will not do.

The worst idea is to foster continued enlargement of the alliance, which the “NATO First Act” would do by subsidizing countries that want to join. NATO may be the first club which pays people to apply rather than vice versa. Most arguments for doing so have essentially nothing to do with augmenting U.S. security.

For instance, McNamara writes of “America’s long-standing bipartisan policy of promoting the democratization and integration of former Soviet satellite countries into the Euro-Atlantic community.” That’s a worthy objective, but democratic integration is something far more appropriate for the European Union.

In her view this process advances American security by “increasing the number of partners and their capacity and abilities to partner with NATO on alliance missions such as Kosovo and Afghanistan.” However, the former, undertaken in a region of no strategic interest to the United States, was of no security benefit to America. Indeed, Washington’s attempt to dictate boundaries in the Balkans has created greater regional instability, made Washington directly responsible for human rights abuses against ethnic Serbs, and soured relations with Russia.

In Afghanistan (and Iraq) the military value of the limited contributions—ranging from a couple score, such as from Estonia, to a couple thousand, such as from Georgia—of the new and potential new members of NATO has been negligible, and no where worth the cost of all the aid pumped into those same nations. McNamara also writes of “building interpersonal relationships between the militaries and commanders of partner countries,” as if Washington had much to gain from such relationships with countries that possess far more potential adversaries than military resources.

In any case, even the most fantastic claims of security benefits come in well below the cost and risk of guaranteeing the security of politically unstable, economically weak, and strategically vulnerable states. Even a science fiction writer would have trouble concocting a scenario under which the United States would be vitally affected by a contingency involving Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria or Georgia, to name a few new NATO members or aspirants.

There obviously are reasons to wish them well, but it cannot be America’s purpose—assuming preserving U.S. security remains the American government’s most important duty—to willy-nilly promise to defend everyone from everyone, especially from a nuclear-armed power like Russia. That small nations next to a larger state ready to play the bully desire protection is understandable. But that does not warrant America risking war.

Indeed, irrespective of NATO membership, it is hard to imagine France, Germany and Italy, in particular, declaring war on Russia to save Estonia or Georgia. As “Old Europe” has seen NATO expansion prepare to incorporate countries seriously at odds with Moscow, enthusiasm for enlarging the alliance has flagged. Even if Washington is able to force the accession of Georgia and Ukraine, America’s most important allies are likely to prove no more enthusiastic in backing up the new commitments in the event of a crisis. Fighting with recalcitrant allies would be almost as bad as

fighting without allies.

Some enlargement advocates assume that Washington need only whisper its support to a friendly state and potential adversaries will assume the fetal position. If only that were true. But the United States is not the only nation that is concerned with security, worries about its borders, and is willing to use force to advance its interests. Nor is America the only country with nuclear weapons. Advocates of American military intervention endlessly denounce the slightest hesitation to intervene and threaten war as “appeasement.” Facing aggressively expansionistic U.S. policy, Russian policymakers are likely to speak in similar terms when dealing with Washington. And if it comes to securing the border, they may not back down.

It is hard to know what Europe will become. McNamara is right to point to “the European project’s serious lack of legitimacy and credibility.”

Attempting to force through continental in Brussels by preventing everyone except the Irish from voting—and forcing the Irish to continue voting until they say yes—is not likely to yield anything equivalent to a real country. For the very same reason, however, McNamara need not worry about the EU being “a counterweight in the making.” Europe does not speak with one voice, and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future; it almost certainly will not have a military commensurate with its economic influence for an even longer time.

If Europe is to play a more important security role, something in America’s and Europe’s interests, it will do so only because of necessity. That is, the Europeans will not do more until Americans do less. Even then Europe might not rally behind the vision of Nicolas Sarkozy and others of turning the continent into a global power. There is, however, no chance of them much of anything serious until Washington stops subsidizing their security dependence.

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