

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## France Steps Up

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May 23, 2013

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Europe is slowly disarming. For decades the continent could rely on America to fill the gap. No longer. That realization has given France pause. Maybe other European states also will start taking their security responsibilities more seriously.

A new report from the European Union's Institute for Security Studies acknowledged an unpleasant reality—centuries of the West's and especially Europe's "dominance are currently giving way to a more multipolar and less governable world system." That wouldn't be such a problem if the change was not combined with diminishing military capabilities, again especially in Europe.

Noted ISS: "Failing to act, therefore, means that a mixture of acute budgetary pressures, lack of investment in research development, and widespread reluctance to make the maintenance of effective armed forces a political priority could cause additional reductions in EU military capacity as well as a potential exodus of the defense industry and a loss of technological leadership." The Europeans are spending ever less, with "the budget cuts carried out so far have been made without any coordination and consultation among allies." Moreover, European governments are spending unwisely, emphasizing personnel and land-based facilities, for instance.

A continuing reduction in capabilities seems likely if not quite inevitable because Europe no longer faces any serious, let alone existential, threats. Russia is a poor replacement for the Soviet Union. It is impossible to build a plausible scenario for Russian troops threatening Warsaw or Berlin, let alone Paris or London. Moscow still might beat up on its neighboring constituent republics, such as Georgia, but the latter actually started their war.

China might become a peer competitor of America, but it has no European ambitions. Balkan instability is no substitute for potential aggression from whomever. North Africa and the Middle East generate continual geopolitical complications, but getting involved usually creates even greater problems. Even a nuclear Iran—an unpleasant prospect, to be sure—seems unlikely to target Europe. About all that's left for Europe's militaries are distant nation building, anti-pirate sea patrols, and play-acting like a Weltmacht.

EU leaders still might talk about creating a continental foreign policy and military, and national politicians still might want armed forces capable of doing more than providing an honor guard for foreign dignitaries, but European peoples exhibit little interest in paying the resulting bill. Spending more efficiently and collaborating more extensively would help, but the continent's ongoing Euro crisis, recession, and heavy indebtedness all encourage further retrenchment. One visiting NATO official told a private, off-the-

record gathering in Washington, “There is no chance for budget increases, not even for keeping spending levels as they are.” Earlier this year Rasmussen declared, “There is a lower limit on how little we can spend on defense.” But what is it?

This is a prescription for eventual European 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. Both Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande had wars they wanted to fight—Libya and Mali, respectively. However, they both found Paris to be unable to fight without 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*. 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. The planned yearly cuts will be smaller than under the previous president, Nicolas Sarkozy. France will maintain its capability for expeditionary warfare, and boost special forces.”

One reason for this is Gallic pride, even ego. President Hollande explained: “France’s destiny is to be a global nation and our duty is to guarantee not only our own security but that of our allies and partners.” In doing so, he added, “France wants to maintain its ability to react alone.” How could it be any other way?

Opposition legislators complained that the proposed force was inadequate for such a role. Vincent Desportes, former director of a military school, told the New York Times that the plan “makes France a really minor actor in coalition operations.” However, a budget increase was inconceivable in today’s economic climate.

The second reason is more significant. 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 Pond. As the *livre blanc* delicately put it, Americans will “prove more selective in their overseas engagements.” This led to one conclusion. Noted the Economist: “One arresting element is the recognition that France may have to step up militarily in the Mediterranean and Africa as America pulls back.”

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 other specialties. Said Le Drian, new investments “seem to me inevitable, like intelligence and special forces.”

This may be a seminal moment for European defense policy. 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.”

Hallelujah!

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 hid behind its pacifist constitution and 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."

A lack of capacity did not stop Britain and France from pushing for war with Libya, though they received only limited support from other European states and had to go to Washington for additional assistance. However, American officials have demonstrated far greater reluctance to join the Syrian civil war. As the U.S. further reduces both capabilities and obligations, even Paris realizes that Washington might say no to its next war proposal.

Which means France must do more than it really wished. But Paris apparently will do what it must.

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 let the Europeans decide how much they want to spend to defend what. And allow them to bear the consequences.

The same goes for the Balkans, Mediterranean, Central Asia and Middle East. 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. If they decide not to act, no worries. There's no reason for the U.S. to pull Europe's chestnuts out of the fire.

There's still substantial room for 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 told us 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 the French realized that the Yanks really might not be coming, they did something different. Washington needs to send the same message to the rest of its defense dependents.

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