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Old NATO Turns 60

By [Doug Bandow](#)

When NATO was created six decades ago, its purpose was obvious: protect war-torn Western Europe from Soviet pressure. Today the organization appears to be more international social club than military alliance. Exactly how NATO benefits the United States is difficult to discern as President Barack Obama prepares to attend this weekend's anniversary celebration in Europe.

In April 1949 Europe was only slowly recovering from the most ruinous war in human history. Communist parties were bidding for electoral power in France and Italy. In Athens an authoritarian regime was struggling to defeat a communist insurgency. The Red Army stood triumphant behind the "Iron Curtain." Communism would soon conquer the Chinese mainland.

To avoid losing Western Europe to the Soviet Union Washington created NATO formally the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but in reality North America and the Others. Yet in promoting NATO Secretary of State Dean Acheson assured Congress that the U.S. troop presence would be only temporary.

In 1951 Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the alliance's first supreme commander, argued that Washington should "set clear limits" on the length of time America would garrison the continent. A decade later he complained that "permanent troop establishments abroad" would "discourage the development of the necessary military strength Western European countries should provide themselves."

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However, Washington policymakers grew to love America's role as Defense Dominatrix to a dependent Europe. Throughout the Cold War the allies constantly repeated a bit of Kabuki Theater. U.S. policymakers would demand, urge, and beg sometimes simultaneously the Europeans to do more militarily. European policymakers would agree and often promise specific spending increases. Then the Europeans would welch, blaming domestic social needs and/or political opposition. And the process would begin anew.

Just as Europe cheerfully enjoyed a cheap if not quite free ride on the U.S. military, Europe equally cheerfully ignored Washington's strategic priorities on the continent and elsewhere. European states decided to build a natural gas pipeline straight to the Evil Empire over America's objections. The Europeans subsidized the Sandinista regime that the Reagan administration was attempting to oust. France refused to grant overflight rights to American aircraft to attack Libya. And so on.

The point is not that the U.S. was always right, but that the U.S. got little out of the trans-Atlantic alliance, whose members went their own way whenever they felt like it. During the Cold War American policymakers might tell themselves that they had no choice but to defend the feckless Europeans. However, this argument for the alliance disappeared along with the Cold War.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, termination of the Warsaw Pact, and withdrawal of the Red Army left even the most devoted NATO backer in a desperate search for alternative missions. Not that any offered much substitute for deterring a Soviet invasion.

But U.S. troops remain on station throughout the continent. Whatever they are doing, it is not protecting America.

First, Russia poses no serious military threat to the U.S. or Europe. Moscow is acting like a traditional great power, concerned about protecting its border security and raising its international status, not waging an ideological contest or launching a war of conquest.

Moreover, America spends several times as much as Russia on defense, possesses a superior nuclear force and vastly better conventional military, and enjoys a GDP a dozen times that of Russia. The Europeans have an even greater economic advantage and also outspend Moscow militarily. The Russian Humpty Dumpty has fallen off of the wall and Moscow can't put it back together without spending money it doesn't have.

Second, the Europeans are capable of containing Moscow if the latter should threaten the continent. The Europeans do so little to create effective military forces because they don't see any reason to do so. Notes my Cato Institute colleague Ted Galen Carpenter: "The gap between America's military capabilities and those of its European partners has grown to be a chasm." Joint missions might soon become practically impossible. Despite the fears of Russia's immediate neighbors, the "old" Europeans know that the prospect of a Russian invasion is a paranoid fantasy. Moreover, they figure America would save them if Russian tanks ever did head down the Unter den Linden and Champs-Élysées. So why do more?

The Europeans certainly won't do more unless America does less. Today only four European countries, including Greece, which primarily arms itself against Turkey, meet NATO's minimum of two percent of GDP half of America's spending level. Although Washington has been making a vastly larger military effort for decades, Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace argues that slowing U.S. military spending which accounts for roughly half of global military outlays "would make it harder to press allies to do more." Since when have the allies spent more because the U.S. spent even more?

The incentives are precisely the reverse. The Europeans will never do more unless they have to do more. Without America's comforting presence, the European countries, both individually and collectively, would have to take a colder and harder look at the geopolitical environment and make military decisions accordingly.

Third, the expansion of NATO is creating a more rather than less dangerous world for America. Since the end of the Cold War the alliance has drawn the U.S. into conflict rather than protected Americans from conflict. For instance, civil war in the Balkans, though terrible, never threatened U.S. interests. Europe, in contrast, had much more at stake. American policymakers apparently believed that NATO, then celebrating its 50th anniversary, had to initiate an unprovoked, aggressive war against Serbia to save the decrepit alliance.

Alas, the risks to America are growing. In the main, the newest members of the alliance, such as Albania and Croatia, have negligible military capabilities but significant political liabilities. Prospective members Georgia and Ukraine, which face instability at home and threats from abroad, are military sinkholes.

If Moscow believes the U.S. would go to war over states that were part of Imperial Russia as well as the Soviet Union, NATO membership might limit Russian action. But Moscow understandably doubts American willingness to fight over what are, in truth, peripheral geopolitical interests for Washington. And attempting to coerce Russia, in contrast to bombing Serbia and invading Iraq, would risk a nuclear confrontation. By multiplying its security guarantees the U.S. is becoming less secure.

Yet at least most alliance aficionados believe that NATO should remain theoretically connected to Europe. Not so Will Marshall of the Progressive Policy Institute, who advocates "offering NATO membership to some stable, non-Western democracies" such as Brazil, India, Japan, and South Africa. Doing so, he explains, "would give the international community a more powerful tool for carrying out vital tasks ranging from peacekeeping to emergency relief around the world." Yet almost by definition these tasks do not affect basic U.S. security and are not vital. Moreover, both peacekeeping and relief operations are routinely carried out through existing international organizations. Differences among NATO members today often are dramatic; Marshall's prospective membership could agree on even less.

Fourth, Washington gets little out of area benefits in return for its continental security guarantee and military garrison. This doesn't mean that the Europeans do nothing elsewhere. Michael Rühle, deputy head of NATO's Policy Planning Section, proudly declares that "NATO is busier than ever before and increasingly acting in concert with the wider international community" and involved in "an ever broader spectrum of missions."

Yet most of these activities are irrelevant to U.S. security, have been performed poorly, or could be handled outside of NATO. The only alliance military mission that really matters, Afghanistan, verges on failure. European peoples see little to gain from risking their troops in Afghanistan, limiting the commitment of all but the most stalwart European governments. Moreover, many of the NATO contingents, out of combat and out of shape, are well nigh useless.

Neither U.S. pressure nor European embarrassment has improved alliance performance. British defense secretary John Hutton has warned: "Success in Afghanistan is fast emerging as the test of NATO's relevance in this new post-cold war age." Otherwise, "NATO will risk being irrelevant, a talking shop where process is everything." But the alliance became that long ago. NATO's inability and unwillingness to do more in a conflict that really matters to America demonstrate just how little Washington gets for its efforts in Europe. Better for the U.S. to bring its troops home and seek allied support on an ad hoc basis than maintain the pretense that NATO substantially advances America's interests around in the world.

The U.S. and Europe continue to have much in common and could forge new, more effective forms of cooperation for the 21st century. Washington could replace American membership in NATO with a more flexible system of regular if informal consultation and cooperation in and out of Europe, backed by agreements for intelligence sharing, emergency base access, and joint training exercises.

A couple of weeks ago Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that he wasn't going to NATO's upcoming anniversary celebration in order to spend the time reviewing the Pentagon budget. The best reason for Secretary Gates to stay home would be to revamp American defense policy to better reflect American interests. Which would include taking the moribund trans-Atlantic alliance off of life support.

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