



NATO drowning amid austerity and lack of purpose?

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NATO is a military union with no clear enemy to fight and with bills footed increasingly by a single member. As the alliance threatens North Korea and weighs a pullout of Afghanistan, some argue that it is past time for NATO to be dismantled.

The initial purpose of the trans-Atlantic defense union was to prepare for war with the communist Soviet Union, and to give its European members time to recover from the damage of World War II: “To keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down,” in the words of Lord Hastings Ismay, NATO’s first chief.

Those needs were apparently served more than two decades ago. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Germany becoming a unified and war-skeptical country, NATO has struggled to find a new arena in which to leverage its military might, waging ‘out of area’ wars.

The last NATO mission near the borders of a member-state was in Yugoslavia in the 1990s; many European members of the alliance are now more reluctant than ever to spend their resources on operations not directly related to Europe’s security.

While the US has always been the lead player in NATO, its share in funding the alliance is now at an all-time high.

“The declining European defense budget and the fact that the US accounts for nearly 73 percent of total NATO defense spending is unbalanced and unsustainable over time,” Adm. James Stavridis, NATO’s outgoing Supreme Allied Commander and head of US European Command wrote in a blog post on Monday. “American taxpayers will begin to feel that the European Allies and partners are ‘getting a free ride.’”

In 2001, Washington financed 63 percent of NATO's military spending. The economic slowdown and austerity measures enacted across Europe over the last few years have made it increasingly hard for this situation to change, even as the US cuts its own defense budget.

The alliance's guideline that member-states must spend 2 percent of their national GDP on the alliance has been broken, as only three European members – the UK, Macedonia and debt-wracked Greece – observe it, US ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder said in December.

Collectively, Europeans spent 1.5 percent of their GDP on defense. By comparison, the US allocates 4.8 percent, remaining the world's biggest military spender.

French soldiers with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) stand during a departure ceremony at the French base in Surobi district in Kabul province on March 18, 2012 (AFP Photo / Shah Marai)

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Europe's biggest economies are meanwhile slashing their defense budgets. Britain's military funding will decrease by \$380 million in 2013 and 2014, and by an additional \$275 million in 2014 and 2015, according to the UK's 2013 budget announcement. France is already at historic lows for defense spending, and is eyeing cuts of almost \$40 billion by 2020.

In 2012, military spending among Asian nations, in particular China, exceeded that of Europeans for the first time.

Washington has for years lamented this situation, calling for its NATO allies to contribute more to their joint coffers. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently admitted that "if European defense spending cuts continue, Europe's ability to be a stabilizing force even in its neighborhood will rapidly disappear."

Europe's military problems were particularly evident in the recent French-British bombing campaign in Libya and the French incursion in Mali. In both operations, European nations have relied on US support for intelligence, drones and refueling.

Some say that America continues to foot NATO's bills as a way of maintaining political clout. Washington "likes the partnership with Europe for political legitimacy, which is not a function of its military capacity," James Steinberg, a former deputy secretary of state and deputy national security adviser told the New York Times.

"The European allies may be useless for many things, but they still provide legitimacy and the continent acts as a worldwide operational hub," a senior NATO official visiting the US recently said, according to Forbes.

But even that is not assured. France – a defiant NATO member even during the Cold War – opposed the US invasion of Iraq. Germany was vocally skeptical of the Libyan campaign, and refused to allow France to use a joint brigade in Mali.

Many believe that it is past time for NATO to take a bow from the stage of history, just as its prime enemy did, rather than serve as a vehicle for interventions and cyber-security cooperation.

"The United States has done its job and ought to go home. Convert NATO into a European partnership, wholly owned and operated by Europeans, thereby allowing Washington to focus its attention and resources on more important priorities," argued ex-US Army colonel Andrew Bacevich, who is now a professor of history and international relations at Boston University.

"America's Cold War security policy shielded war-torn allies until they could recover and gain the economic means and political stability to defend themselves. That policy was a great success. Now Washington should celebrate by turning NATO over to the Europeans," explained Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.