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Departing Europe

by Doug Bandow

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Since the formation of NATO more than sixty years ago the Europeans have scrimped on defense. With an essentially bankrupt continent desperately cutting back on government spending, Europe's military outlays will fall further. Washington's finances are equally bad: the United States also should cut military expenditures, especially for Europe.

The transatlantic alliance was created in 1949 as relations with the Soviet Union grew frosty. The image of the Red Army pouring through the Fulda Gap fueled Western nightmares.

Nevertheless, NATO always stood for North (America) and the Others. In the alliance's early years the European members understandably concentrated on economic reconstruction. But they never stopped leaving the heavy military lifting to the United States.

Washington regularly begged its allies to increase their defense outlays and they regularly agreed to do so. Then they just as regularly reneged, citing domestic needs and political obstacles. By the 1980s the Europeans actively opposed U.S. initiatives in Central America and elsewhere.

But America continued to protect its errant allies.

Then came the collapse of Communism. What then was the purpose of NATO, the quintessential anti-Soviet alliance?

Today Europe no longer needs defending. There is no more threatening Red Army. Moscow possesses only a limited conventional capability and has no interest in marching on Warsaw or Budapest, let alone Berlin or Paris. The European Union collectively possesses a larger population and economy than does America.

NATO fans first responded with proposals that the alliance deal with illicit drugs and the environment. Then it promoted regional integration by expanding into Central and Eastern Europe. None of these missions made much sense. NATO is a military alliance. The European Union always was a better vehicle for achieving nonmilitary ends.

Next NATO went to war "out of area," launching an aggressive war against Serbia—which had threatened no alliance member—to settle ethnic conflict in Kosovo. But the Balkans mattered far more to Europe than to the United States.

Now there is the mission in Afghanistan. Alas, that remains primarily America's war. The most important allied assistance comes from just a handful of states and could be provided bilaterally. (Australia already does so outside of NATO.) Most European states have deployed small contingents, hamstrung by "caveats," or combat restrictions, well away from the battlefield. All are looking for the exit.

Along the way NATO expansion has made America less secure. Bringing in the Balkan and Baltic countries added liabilities with precious few capabilities. Adding Georgia and Ukraine to the alliance would be even worse, creating huge security black holes. Neither country is remotely relevant to U.S. security. America's membership in NATO is supposed to protect America, not make other states more secure by increasing the risk to Americans.

After leaving military affairs largely to America, leading Europeans retained a delusion of turning the European Union into a *Weltmacht*. They touted the Lisbon Treaty, which created a new president and foreign minister and promoted a "common security and defense policy." However, the treaty has delivered bureaucratic confusion rather than continental confidence—there now are three different presidents (two permanent and one rotating) squabbling over organizational primacy. The "High Representative" for foreign affairs has spent more time negotiating with EU politicians than foreign nations.

More important, the Europeans still refuse to develop militaries warranting a new European foreign and defense policy. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen admitted that the system "will remain a paper tiger if it is not followed by concrete contributions when we need concrete military contributions."

However, there is not the slightest chance that such contributions will be forthcoming. Most European nations have steadily cut defense spending over the last two decades. Just five meet the NATO objective of 2 percent of GDP for their militaries. Several are closer to 1 percent or even below. And the numbers are likely to go down even more. Reported the *Wall Street Journal*: "Governments in France, Germany, Spain and Italy, in rolling out recent austerity measures in response to Europe's sovereign debt crisis, have promised that their militaries won't be spared in coming spending cuts." The United Kingdom's Defense Minister Liam Fox has pledged to cut "ruthlessly and without sentiment."

The Europeans' roughly forty thousand troops on station in Afghanistan also will fall. These deployments are everywhere unpopular. The Dutch government recently fell over a dispute on extending the mission. Even British politicians are talking about bringing their forces home.

The newer members of NATO, supposedly more worried about the still testy Russian Bear, have behaved no differently. In a study for the Strategic Studies Institute, Col. Joel Hillison observed: "While Russian military expenditures began to rise after 2001, the average defensive burden of these new members continued their gradual fall."

Some Americans fulminate against the Europeans, calling them wimps and worse. For instance, Robert Kaplan dismissed European "decadence." He contended:

With their patriotism dissipated, European governments can no longer ask for sacrifices from their populations when it comes to questions of peace and war. Ironically, we may have gained victory in the Cold War, but lost Europe in the process.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates was a bit more polite when he charged in February:

The demilitarization of Europe—where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it—has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st.

No doubt, military force can be useful in a dangerous world. But treating war as just another foreign-policy option can be an even bigger "impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace." For

years the U.S. government has engaged in promiscuous war making and threat mongering, leaving America less secure. In these cases, the “peacenik” Europeans have been more often more right than the United States.

Still, the dream of a revived transatlantic alliance lives on. A so-called “group of experts” headed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright released their report *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement* in mid-May. The document called for “a new Strategic Concept”: defending Europe, confronting unconventional threats, acting outside alliance boundaries, winning in Afghanistan, preventing crises, creating new partnerships, “participating in a comprehensive approach to complex problems,” engaging Russia, adding new members, creating new military capabilities, maintaining nuclear weapons, providing missile defense, responding to cyber attacks, becoming “a more agile alliance” and, last but not least, “telling NATO’s story.”

An earlier, longer report for the European Union Institute for Security Studies called for “a commensurate military capability” to the EU’s “civilian power.” The EUISS also urged the Continent to “to act autonomously from NATO,” which would require “a fully-fledged European command to plan and conduct military operations.”

These are ambitious agendas for nations which may not even have militaries in 2020 at the rate they are cutting defense spending. In fact, there are few threats against which the Europeans must arm. Russia can beat up on hapless Georgia, but trying to swallow Ukraine or Poland would be something else entirely. And a Martian invasion is about as likely as a Russian attack further west.

Of course, the Europeans are affected by events elsewhere in the world. But with existential threats lacking, any wars are likely to be matters of choice, not necessity. And the benefits have to be weighed against the costs. Just how much is it worth to Europeans to keep the Karzai clan in power in Afghanistan? Already there is a sense of “never again” when dealing with Afghanistan. The German defense minister recently proposed four new restrictive criteria, starting with “great and imminent danger to another NATO member.” The Afghan mission probably would have failed all four of his conditions even when it was proposed, let alone today.

The basic issue, argues Andrew Bacevich of Boston University, is cultural: the Europeans have lost their taste for blood. Thus, the attempt to transform NATO “from a defensive alliance into an instrument of power projection,” writes Bacevich, is merely another doomed attempt “to reignite Europe’s martial spirit.” It ain’t going to happen.

Rather than whining about European military spending—especially after doing so much to discourage the continent from acting independently—the United States should allow the Europeans to bear the consequences of their actions. That means withdrawing American troops and leaving NATO to the Europeans. Continental defense should be the responsibility of the EU, essentially NATO without the NA (depending upon what Canada would choose to do). If member states prefer to preserve their expensive and expansive welfare states, then so be it.

It would still be in the interests of both sides to cooperate militarily—on matters of joint interest. Washington simply has nothing at stake in the Balkans. No more U.S. threats, wars, or deployments there. Most Europeans believe Afghanistan is America’s war. The United States should seek support from nations which see involvement as a matter of global security rather than alliance solidarity.

Equally important, America needs to cut its defense budget. Total military outlays exceed \$700 billion—nearly half of global expenditures. Yet America faces no obvious existential threat, other than an unlikely Russian nuclear attack. The United States has no reason to devote limited resources to

defending prosperous and populous allies, most notably in Europe, but also in Asia.

During the Cold War, American officials feared the consequences of allowing their allies to be feckless. Today the allies rather than America would suffer from any mistakes.

Europe is bankrupt. It is spending less on the military. America is bankrupt. It is spending more on the military. And defending Europe.

To coin a phrase, it is time for a change. If the administration won't lead the way, then Congress should take control through the use of the appropriations process.

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