

## **Don't Ask The Europeans To Playact In Asia**

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The mighty Fourth Reich has risen. It is leaving Beijing with no doubt about its power and resolve. The German frigate Bayern is sailing the Pacific, and all China is transfixed by the willingness of Germany and other European states to back Washington's campaign to extend its reach to China's borders.

Well, maybe not.

Europe has become a not very funny farce when it comes to defense. The continent's whining is intense and constant even as its military spending lags the threats it claims to face. And its wish list is both permanent and long: America should reassure allies, America should apologize for imagined offenses, America should put more troops on the continent, America should not change its first use nuclear policy, America should not withdraw any troops, America should expect less of its European allies. America should stop complaining about European cheap riding.

It is this continent and this alliance which Washington is requesting to join the U.S. in confronting China.

Of course, Washington and Brussels would achieve more together dealing with the People's Republic of China. That was one of the great failures of the Trump administration—simultaneously launching trade wars against China and rest of the world, including Europe, was flamboyantly stupid.

The same principle should apply to military security—at least in theory. NATO, always desperate to prove its relevance after the end of the Cold War, has taken to talking about the PRC. The alliance secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, is pushing for greater allied involvement.

Of course, he spent the Trump years telling the president what he wanted to hear, especially extolling Donald Trump's supposed success in moving members toward higher military spending. Yet the improvements, largely inaugurated years before Trump's election, remain limited, inadequate to contain Russia, let alone China as well.

Britain and France have real militaries, but too small to police the remnants of their global empires, confront Russia, and send a credible expeditionary force to Asia. Their outlays are

around 2 percent of their GDP, high for the transatlantic alliance but much too low to pretend to be global powers.

Germany, Italy, and Spain also should be military players, but devote embarrassingly little to their armed forces. Indeed, the latter lags everyone but minuscule Luxembourg and finally just broke the 1 percent level. Their policy toward Russia is: Let America do it! One suspects that they would disband their formal militaries if they believed they could get away with doing so.

Belgium, Slovenia, Canada, Denmark, Czech Republic, Albania, Netherlands, Portugal, Bulgaria, Hungary, North Macedonia, Slovak Republic, Montenegro, and Norway all fall under 2 percent. For the smaller states, that means essentially nonexistent militaries, and especially navies and air forces, the only practical means to engage the People's Liberation Army forces.

Imagine mighty Montenegro, with 2,350 troops under arms, declaring war on the People's Republic China. It would evoke the novel *The Mouse that Roared*. Yet consider the naval strength of even larger NATO members—Albania with five craft, Norway with 45 vessels, Slovenia with no navy, similarly land-locked Czechia, also without a fleet, Denmark with 31 ships, Belgium with seven boats. Sending them to the Pacific suggests another voyage of the damned, a pale version of Russia's doomed 18,000 mile journey in 1904 to fight Japan.

At least Germany has a formal Indo-Pacific strategy, issued last year. Berlin promised to “step up its security policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.” That sounds good, but with what? We know Germany possesses at least one ship capable of sailing. Alas, even if Berlin's entire fleet was prepared for action—does the increasingly secular German population still believe in miracles?—it wouldn't mean much. There are six submarines, ten principal surface combatants, 29 patrol and coastal combatants, and 22 logistics and support vessels.

Which might explain why Germany sees expanded “security and defense cooperation” as mostly non-military: “This may include attending security policy forums, taking part in exercises in the region, elaborating joint evacuation plans, seconding liaison officers and various forms of maritime presence.” No wonder China contemptuously rejected the German request to visit Shanghai.

Moreover, why would anyone take Germany seriously in the Pacific when it has persistently failed to treat seriously its security at home? For instance, Berlin most recently came in at only 1.53 percent of GDP going to defense. Alas, the problem is not just inadequate spending.

The Atlantic Council's Jorge Benitez cited the “abysmal” readiness of the Bundeswehr. The past Bundestag Military Commissioner, Hans-Peter Bartels, warned that “There is neither enough personnel nor materiel, and often one confronts shortage upon shortage.” A British officer once described the Bundeswehr as “an aggressive camping organization.” London's *Daily Mail* cited Bartels' reports in declaring of German soldiers in Afghanistan: “They drink too much and they're too fat to fight.” In 2019, *Defense & Security Monitor* reported that none of Germany's submarines could deploy, along with similarly immobile aircraft, tanks, and other equipment.

Last year, Bartels stated that he wished “I could report a sweeping and noticeable improvement in the conditions our servicewomen and men are serving under...But every time the Parliamentary Commissioner visits the troops, every time members of parliament, heads of ministries and the chiefs of staff of the military organizational elements visit the troops, servicewomen and men repeatedly raise the same concerns: too little materiel, too few personnel, too much bureaucracy.” Claudia Major, of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, complained of “low readiness of the armed forces. We have decades of underinvestment, poor management, lack of political attention, and this all has affected the Bundeswehr German armed forces, and the availability of forces for both collective defense and operations.”

Worse, what of the willingness of Germans’ willingness to fight on behalf of others? Last year the Pew Research Center found that only a third of Germans would fight for other Europeans. Backing for NATO fell from 73 percent in 2009 to 57 percent in 2019, the second largest fall among those surveyed. Nor should anyone count on Berlin’s commitment to Washington. The European Council on Foreign Relations conducted a poll earlier this year which found that only 19 percent of Germans considered America to be an ally and 39 percent to be a “necessary partner.”

Nor does the U.S. look good compared to China. According to Adam Taylor of the Washington Post: “Polling data from Pew Research released last year found that 55 percent of Germans thought China had overtaken the United States as the world’s leading economic power. A poll conducted for the *Welt* newspaper by polling firm Infratest Dimap in December found that only 17 percent of Germans supported siding with the United States in a potential U.S.-China conflict, with three-quarters preferring to remain neutral.”

In fact, most of Europe receives a failing grade. Last fall Germany’s Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer commented on the continent’s over-reliance on the U.S.:

According to estimates by the renowned London-based RUSI institute, the United States currently provides 75 percent of all NATO capabilities.

It provides 70 percent of what we call ‘strategic enablers,’ which include reconnaissance, helicopters, air refueling and satellite communications capabilities.

It contributes almost 100 percent of defense capabilities against ballistic missiles to NATO. And of course, the United States provides the vast majority of nuclear deterrence capabilities.

Some 76,000 US soldiers are deployed in Europe. This is not counting the troops that the United States would send for reinforcement in the event of war.

Earlier this year the Center for American Progress reported that “European militaries have now experienced decades of decline. Today, much of Europe’s military hardware is in a shocking state of disrepair. ... European forces aren’t ready to fight with the equipment they have, and the equipment they have isn’t good enough.”

Nor does the rest of Europe want to fight for anyone, least of all for America against China. Gil Barndollar and Natalie Armbruster of Defense Priorities warned: “This neutrality is grounded in basic economic realities. In 2020, China overtook the United States to become the EU’s biggest trading partner in imports and exports...When it infringes on their economic interests, European states are far less willing to confront China.”

The U.S. can no longer afford to defend most of the known world. Nor can Washington make the known world defend itself. So American officials should try a different strategy.

They should stop urging the Europeans to do what the latter will not do, devote significant military resources against China in the Asia-Pacific. This effort is unlikely to have much impact. And if it worked, it would divert resources from more useful pursuits, in this case, European efforts to ensure their own security. Instead of whining, the U.S. should begin shifting its own forces out of Europe, leaving its allies to bear the consequences. They could then decide how to respond.

To Germany, the Bayern’s voyage is a break from recent history. To China, it looks like either a joke or an insult. To Washington, it seems like a breakthrough. To most Americans, it is a waste of time, resources, and effort. People forever expected to pay for everyone else’s defense deserve serious allies willing to make a serious effort on behalf of shared security interests.

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