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President Donald Trump Spoiled NATO Party In Brussels And Americans Should Thank Him

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NATO leaders gathered yesterday. The meeting didn't go as planned. To his credit, President Donald Trump put America first when he addressed them.

That's certainly not what they expected. There was much scuttlebutt about how the Europeans planned to play President Trump. Push simple ideas, make him think he won something. This would, they hoped, "Trump-proof" the summit. Nevertheless, they were "freaking out," one anonymous source stated ahead of time.

The Europeans' chief allies were his own aides, as Secretaries Rex Tillerson and Jim Mattis went native, talking up the alliance. Indeed, the president apparently was shamed into explaining that he really didn't know anything about NATO when he criticized it as "obsolete" during the campaign. Now, he allowed, that is "no longer" the case.

The gathering was expected to be superficial, mostly a meet-and-greet with the new "leader of the free world," as America's president so often is styled. The Europeans planned on talking up the president's hobbyhorse, greater NATO involvement in fighting terrorism, and pushing for an unequivocal administration commitment to mutual defense, including of those states at the alliance's eastern edge.

Alas for the Europeans, the president apparently didn't receive the memo with his lines. Instead of following their script he reiterated his persistent criticism that they spend too little on the military and leave the heavy lifting to America. European governments had expected to chat about the issue, but not after such a harsh public critique. "NATO members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations," he declared. Failing to do so "is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States." Thus, he concluded, the Europeans owe America "massive amounts of money" from the past.

He also failed to emphasize his administration's commitment to Article 5 and the promise to defend all 27 other members. During the campaign he threatened to stand aloof if members didn't "fulfill their obligations to us." The most he would say in Brussels was that America would "never forsake the friends that stood by our side" after 9/11. Presidential aides argued that this was an endorsement of "mutual defense," even though it obviously wasn't.

Nicholas Burns, a former ambassador to NATO, complained that “This is the first president since 1949 not to mention Article 5.” He said he was “stunned” by the president’s speech. The Europeans certainly noticed. Secretary of State Tillerson said “Of course we support Article 5,” but it wasn’t clear to anyone else in Brussels that the latter’s “we” included the president.

Which made it a traumatic day for European leaders. The president was inept, insulting and rude, complained analysts. What was supposed to be a noncontroversial feel-good exercise to reassure and coddle European governments instead filled capitals across the continent with a mix of angst and irritation.

Americans should applaud.

NATO was established almost seven decades ago. It was a Cold War creation, designed, announced the organization’s first Secretary General, Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” And it succeeded, providing a largely U.S. defense shield behind which the Europeans recovered economically and reconstituted politically. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Russians left and the Germans rose. At that point there was no need to keep the Americans in.

But bureaucracies are nothing if not creative in finding new duties to justify their survival. Although still nominally a military alliance devoted to protecting Europe, NATO became a welcome wagon for former Soviet states and satellites and an international cop for “out-of-area” activities, such as in the Balkans, North Africa, and Central Asia. Members assumed the military alliance wouldn’t actually have to fight anyone serious, so treated NATO as the international equivalent of a gentlemen’s club, which anyone who wanted to be someone could join. In paraded a variety of geopolitical nonentities, highlighted by imminent member 29, Montenegro, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the Duchy of Grand Fenwick in the novel *The Most that Roared*.

Along the way Europeans cut budgets and demobilized soldiers. The disparity in combat capabilities grew even larger. At the time of the 1999 allied attack on Serbia, justified by some as necessary to give the alliance a purpose to justify its existence, the European NATO members were estimated to have 10 to 15 percent of Washington’s combat capability. A dozen years later when the alliance intervened against Libya’s hapless Moammar Qaddafi, who had signed away his missile and nuclear programs, the European governments which most desired war ran out of missiles and had to ask America for resupply.

But the most dramatic measure of European lassitude is military spending, which dropped steadily from its recent peak in 2008. In 2014, the year Russia occupied Crimea, NATO Europe continued to cut its collective outlays, reducing inflation-adjusted spending by one percent. The following year brought a slight uptick of .5 percent. Last year NATO officials celebrated the rise of 3.8 percent as if was a harbinger of the Second Coming.

Yet NATO Europe’s overall military outlays in 2016 accounted for just 1.47 percent of GDP, up a staggering .03 percent from the year before. But even the recent peak wasn’t impressive, 1.69 percent in 2009. As the president complained, only five of 28 members last year hit the NATO

objective of two percent: America, Estonia, Great Britain, Greece, and Poland. But even this number gives too much to NATO Europe. Great Britain and Poland manipulated statistics to get past the line, while Greece spends primarily to counter fellow alliance member Turkey, not Moscow. Only Estonia worries much about Russia.

At or below one percent are Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Spain. One is tempted to ask them, why bother even having a military? They could just hire some unemployed actors to strut around in colorful uniforms, costing a lot less while creating the illusion of being well-armed.

Other governments look little better. Latvia and Lithuania, which have been demanding Western, meaning mostly American, garrisons came in at 1.46 and 1.49 percent, respectively. This from “front-line” states claiming to be most at risk of Russian aggression. France, which along with the United Kingdom possesses the continent’s most competent and efficient armed forces, devoted just 1.79 percent of GDP to defense. Germany, with Europe’s largest economy and greatest military potential, spent an anemic 1.19 percent.

The Europeans’ principal con is to say, forget the present and look to the future. In 2014 NATO nations promised to move to two percent by 2024. For the first time in years, argue alliance backers, members are moving in the right direction.

Yet if Russia really poses an existential threat to Europe, it makes little sense to wait years to respond. The promise of future action looks like an effort to assuage Washington rather than deter Moscow. By 2024 the world will look different, there will be another U.S. president, and NATO cannot hold anyone to their promises anyway.

Indeed, while spending two percent of GDP looks like a simple task, it means many alliance members would have to double their military outlays. That is unlikely. Despite the modest collective uptick in 2016, nine countries either cut spending or held hikes below one percent. Eleven states had only single digit increases. Germany upped outlays by just 3.16 percent. At these rates none of them are going to meet the two percent standard.

And there is little political support for a massive build-up. Belgium barely holds together as a nation. Spain has a minority government. Italy faces the prospect of elections with a vibrant populist party. In its recent vote the Netherlands saw a further fracturing of the political center and so far no one has been able to assemble a governing coalition. In Germany the left and public oppose any meaningful military build-up. The point is both basic and simple: most Europeans perceive minimal security threats. With their treasured welfare state under financial siege, they don’t see any reason to spend more on their armed forces, irrespective of what Washington or Brussels wants.

Indeed, the likelihood of Russia attacking NATO appears close to the possibility of a Martian invasion. What would Vladimir Putin gain that could be worth the cost and risk involved? By every measure of power Europe handily outdistances Russia. For instance, NATO’s European members spent an estimated \$265 billion last year on their armed forces, nearly four times Moscow’s expenditures of roughly \$68 billion. The Russian military would have some obvious

advantages against a disunited collection of national forces, but still lacks the capacity to conquer and pacify Ukraine, let alone Europe.

And the Europeans could do far more if they thought it necessary. The European Union possesses roughly 13 times Russia's economic strength. Russia's economy is smaller than that of Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and even Italy. The continent has roughly thrice Russia's population. The issue is Europe's willingness, not capability. The Europeans don't do more because they don't believe they need to do more.

And it is hard to blame them. Despite the sometime hysteria that has resulted from Moscow's actions in Georgia and Ukraine, nothing suggests that the Putin government plans a suicidal attack on Europe proper.

First, Georgia and Ukraine were special cases—former parts of the Russian Empire as well as Soviet Union, subject to “color revolutions” backed by Washington and Brussels, ruled by antagonists to Moscow, and far to the east on Russia's border. After what the Putin regime saw as multiple provocations, going back to NATO expansion to its borders and dismantlement of long-time friend Serbia, Russian intervention neutralized border threats and precluded NATO's deep intrusion threatening core interests, especially in Ukraine. Moreover, Tbilisi actually started the shooting in 2008, effectively excusing Moscow's intervention and demonstrating Georgia's lack of suitability as a NATO member.

Second, despite Moscow's subsequent willingness to unsettle the skittish and oft-whiny Baltic States and Poland, Russia would gain little and risk much from attacking either. Nor has Putin ever evidenced a desire to forcibly rule non-Russians, which would be a source of instability, not strength. His behavior, though morally objectionable, has been eminently rational and calculated. Nothing suggests a willingness to commit national suicide.

For all of the dire talk of the dangers posed by Moscow from war-happy Neoconservatives such as Senators Lindsey Graham and John McCain, Russia poses even less of a threat to the U.S. Nowhere do the two states' vital issues collide: Georgia and Ukraine have little security value to America, Europe is not at practical risk from Moscow, and Russian involvement in Syria is minuscule compared to Washington's perpetual, pervasive, and largely failed intervention in the Middle East. If Washington was truly worried about rising Chinese influence in Asia, American officials would repair the relationship with Moscow, rather than push Russia and Beijing together.

President Trump was right to confront the Europeans. For too long they have enjoyed a cheap-ride on U.S. taxpayers. Americans are expected to forever safeguard Asian allies and trade routes, perpetually remake the Middle East, purposelessly intervene in Central Asia, and permanently protect prosperous and populous Europe. The commitment which makes the least sense is the latter, given the continent's extraordinary wealth and relative security.

Instead of engaging in an ever fruitless and increasingly bitter squabble over Europe's compliance with arbitrary standards—does it really much matter if Slovenian, Italian, or German military outlays come in at 1.3, 1.7, or 2.01 percent of GDP?—the Trump administration should

begin to shed rather than share the burden of defending Europe. The Europeans may decide that nothing more is necessary and that would be fine. What matters is that they be responsible for their own security and decide accordingly.

Give President Trump his due. He appointed a gaggle of advisers who represent the status quo and did their best to force him into an establishment mold. But he refused to go along with the polite fiction that all is well within the transatlantic alliance.

Now he should take the next step. Stop pretending that there remains a case for Americans to protect Europeans. Cooperate, yes, including against terrorism. But as equals. No longer should Washington allow European states to pose as the helpless dependents they started as almost 70 years ago. It is time for U.S. officials to put America first in designing security policy, including in Europe.

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