

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Case for Refashioning NATO

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July 11, 2018

Give President Donald Trump credit. He has gotten Europe's attention. For decades American presidents and defense secretaries threatened, badgered, asked and begged European leaders to spend more on their militaries. Uncle Sam's persistent whining was embarrassing for a superpower.

Yet even during the Cold War while facing the Soviet Union, aka the Evil Empire, NATO's European members largely acted as if fielding armed services was a luxury rather than a necessity. Their promises to do more were mostly pro forma and routinely violated. After the end of the Cold War most of the countries rushed to disarm, abandoning many of the efforts they had been making. Today, with 52 percent of America's and Europe's combined GDP, Washington accounts for 72 percent of the military spending, and an even greater share of the alliance's capabilities.

The Europeans essentially laughed off Washington's requests for two reasons. Few NATO member governments appeared to take Moscow seriously as a threat. After all, who would build a natural gas pipeline to a country you believed planned on conquering you? They also took America's measure. Washington policymakers might huff and puff, but they desperately wanted to appear to be running Europe. In the end Americans would make up any European deficiencies. Perhaps the surprise was that no European ally formally disbanded its military, which presumably would have been one ostentatious step too far.

Despite the Europeans' post-Cold War approach of doing less, the Clinton and Bush administrations insisted upon rapid NATO expansion, up to Russia's borders contra promises made to Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. No one, it appeared, actually considered the military consequences of expansion, and precisely how the alliance would defend, say, the Baltic States from attack.

There were fewer potential new members under President Barack Obama. Albania and Croatia completed a membership process begun by the previous administration. He was left to bring in the major geopolitical power Montenegro, along with its two thousand man military and eight armored personnel carriers. Thankfully Monaco was not also knocking on NATO's door. Exactly

how adding ever weaker states of no military value enhanced American security was not explained.

Left unfilled were NATO's 2008 promises to include Georgia and Ukraine. It obviously was a bad idea even then. Volatile Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili—recently convicted in absentia in Georgia and deported from Ukraine after falling out with his hosts—started a disastrous war with the Russian Federation in 2008. He apparently expected U.S. backing, but instead saw Abkhazia and South Ossetia officially declare independence with Moscow's assistance.

The prospect of Ukraine joining NATO was even more unpleasant for Russia. Ukraine was the largest territory to leave the Soviet Union and previously had been heartland territory of the Russian Empire. The election of Russian-leaning Viktor Yanukovich in 2010 eased tensions, but after his ouster in a 2014 street putsch backed by Brussels and Washington—U.S. officials openly talked about who they wanted to run a new government—Moscow detached Crimea and backed separatists in the Donbas in Ukraine's east. That triggered sanctions on Russia which continue, along with the fighting.

The Ukraine conflict triggered an existential crisis for NATO. Members were reminded that it was a military alliance, not a social club. Countries bordering Russia, most notably the Baltics and Poland, began squealing for greater commitment to their security even though they spent little on their own defense. "Old Europe," as Donald Rumsfeld once called it, continued to trim military outlays while looking at the floor when the idea of war with Russia came up. Few European states met even NATO's anemic 2 percent of GDP standard. The United Kingdom got there through statistical legerdemain, while Greece armed mostly against historic enemy, and NATO partner, Turkey. Of the most vulnerable states, only Estonia bothered to devote two cents on the dollar to its security. So unprepared for combat was the continent that European governments ran out of missiles fighting Libya. They required resupply from Washington.

Since then there has been a flurry of activity, mostly America spending more dollars and deploying more personnel. Obama officials routinely visited Europe to "reassure" allies that Washington would forever defend them, irrespective of what they spent or deployed. And U.S. officials pushed sanctions against Moscow even more persistently than did the Europeans who theoretically were most threatened. Uncle Sam acted like a codependent who expected to be abused by ungrateful "friends." The United States insisted on doing more all the while complaining about being unappreciated.

Despite having to listen to an endless stream of American complaints, the deal was pretty good for Europe. Continue to treat one's militaries as unfortunate necessities while spending as little as possible. Channel one's resources into bountiful welfare states in the midst of economic crisis. Let Washington do the heavy lifting.

Into this world stepped candidate Donald Trump. As a candidate he horrified America's refined defense dependents. In 2016 Europeans flooded the Democratic National Convention, finding solace in the prospect that Hillary Clinton would be elected and continue the Pentagon dole for Europe. Surely it would be business as usual. Washington would complain but then do whatever needed to be done. The continent might be dragged into another peripheral Mideast war, another round in Syria perhaps, but the United States would confront nuclear-armed Russia while covering any minor embarrassments.

Alas, this Edenic world was not to be. President Trump won. Worse than his gauche behavior, he had come to the sensible conclusion that the Europeans expected to continue playing Washington. Although his appointees worked overtime on damage control, assuring the continent of America's continuing love, the inner Donald Trump never was far from view. His criticisms helped spur several European states toward meeting their 2 percent commitment.

Alas, the improvement is largely cosmetic. Seven of the other twenty-eight NATO members are expected to meet that standard this year, all barely. Poland and the Baltic States which so fear Russia, Greece which so fears increasingly authoritarian and Islamist Ankara, Romania, and the United Kingdom. However, the UK's fractured and squabbling parties will be lucky to sustain present outlay levels, especially if the Labor Party forms the next government.

More notable is who is missing. France, which along with the UK possesses the continent's most capable militaries. Paris pledged to try to get to 2 percent—after the current president's term ends. Germany, whose chancellor, Angela Merkel, speaks of a more independent Europe. Berlin spends only 1.24 percent on a military in veritable crisis, ill-prepared to deploy to meet any serious contingency. The current coalition government will not meet its 2 percent commitment, nor will the new administrations in both Italy, Spain, and other influential European states. Overall, the Europeans will remain as dependent as before, while now deflecting criticism by pointing to welcome though minimal progress.

This illustrates the problem with the 2 percent standard. It is simultaneously too high and too low.

European governments find it difficult to increase military outlays because European peoples feel little need to do so. Vladimir Putin is a nasty character, but he isn't Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Benito Mussolini. He is a Russian nationalist, not a communist ideologue. His security vision appears to be that of a Tsar of old: Russia want secure borders and international respect. He expects to be consulted along with other world leaders about international problems.

Georgia was easy prey. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have long had a separate identity and been at odds with their Georgian rulers. Backing their independence was payback for Kosovo and created a frozen conflict inhibiting Tbilisi's entry into NATO.

Ukraine was similar. Imagine how Washington would have reacted to comparable Soviet meddling in Mexico. Crimea, contained an important Sebastopol naval base, was historically Russian and contained an ethnic Russian majority which probably wanted to return to Moscow's embrace. Fomenting conflict in the Donbas weakened Ukraine and likely kept it out of the transatlantic alliance as well.

Neither of these Russian interventions, though lawless and unjustified, was a portent for European-wide aggression. "Winning" would offer few benefits; even Putin has not sought to rule over non-Russian populations. And the result almost certainly would be economic isolation and full-scale war, which Moscow would be bound to lose. Indeed, the United States and Russia are the two nations fully capable of destroying each other with nuclear weapons.

If there is no Slavic Menace, then what? Nothing much. Europe faces its share of international problems, such as terrorism, cyber attacks and economic migrants, but its most important concerns are internal. The Europeans might want to arm to participate in wars of choice, but

most of them are dubious ventures. For instance, France triggered the most dramatic attacks on Paris by warring upon the Islamic State. Europe should be capable, but prudent as well.

If there is no there there, in terms of threat, then why should Europeans spend more on defense? Why spend two percent on militaries which have no obvious role? Maybe even one percent is too much for most European states. Outlays always will be unstable unless there is steady public support for strengthening the armed forces.

However, if there is some as yet undisclosed menace which warrants American involvement in the continent's defense, then two percent of GDP is far too low. After all, Europe's economy is equivalent to America's. Europe's population is larger. If the Europeans need to be defended against someone, they have the wherewithal to do so. If they don't believe the threat warrants devoting even a couple pennies on the dollar to defense, why should the United States spend anything on them? NATO was formed to protect war-ravaged states which could not alone deter the battle-tested Red Army from marching to the Atlantic. Today the Europeans have vastly greater economic strength and significantly larger population than Russia. The Europeans even spend much more on their militaries. There's no reason for Americans to garrison the Baltics, Poland, and more in Europe.

President Trump insisted that NATO has "got to start paying your bills." But such arguments are divisive without yielding much benefit in military effectiveness. Instead of arguing about money, upon which President Trump appears to fixate, the administration should decide what it is willing to do. First, Washington should turn Europe's defense over to Europe. Other than being ready to act if something went drastically wrong and the revived Red Army ended up marching down the Champs-Elysees to the Arc de Triomphe, the United States should view European security with benign neglect. Europeans then would make their military decisions based on their own needs, with the knowledge that they could not offload the problem onto America. How much do they worry and how much are they willing to do in response?

Second, Washington should suggest continuing cooperation over shared interests beyond Europe. That could be both geographic (such as the Middle East) or subject matter (cybersecurity and terrorism). The United Kingdom and France are likely to maintain out-of-area foreign interests, while other Europeans less so. However, the United States, too, should be more circumspect in its foreign entanglements. Iraq was a disaster. Libya was foolish and counterproductive. The endless war in Afghanistan is without purpose. American forces should stay out of the Syrian civil war. If Europe and America were not unnecessarily yoked together in alliance, then they would be less likely to drag each other into the other's favorite senseless wars (e.g., Libya for Europe, Afghanistan for America). Rather, any joint conflicts would have to be important for both sides.

Such a division of responsibilities suggests refashioning NATO. The Europeans could take over the alliance, perhaps with America as an associate member. Or they could turn NATO into something more closely aligned with the European Union, though again offering intermediate status for Washington. The alliance structure would retain the connection between the European and American militaries, encouraging cooperation and coordination. Most important, the United States and various European states could decide on their military outlays based on their own requirements. No longer would Washington attempt to browbeat friendly states into spending more than their populations desired. The more distant relationship could ironically be a smoother and more satisfying one.

NATO needs to change. U.S. ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson said the theme of the upcoming meeting was “strength and unity,” but we should be well beyond such banalities. There is no reason to believe that an alliance created decades ago in the midst of the Cold War is the best form of military organization today. Instead of arguing over spending targets, the allies should discuss defense responsibilities. And then adjust NATO appropriately.

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