

## EUROPEAN SECURITY

Policymakers should

- realize that Europe can defend itself but will not unless the United States stops defending Europe itself;
- abandon efforts to expand NATO;
- vocally support autonomous security cooperation in the European Union as a replacement for NATO/U.S. efforts;
- announce their intention that the next Supreme Allied Commander Europe be a European;
- resume the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Germany as announced by President Donald Trump and rescinded by President Biden, and withdraw the additional 20,000 U.S. troops sent to Eastern Europe in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine;
- revive the annual Defense Department report, Allied Contributions to the Common Defense; and
- hold congressional hearings on defense burden sharing in the context of the NATO alliance.

In 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower lamented to a military adviser that U.S. allies in Europe were “close to ‘making a sucker out of Uncle Sam.’” In Ike’s mind, “so long as they could prove a need for emergency help, that was one thing. But that time has passed.”

More than 60 years later, Europe’s indifference to European security has grown worse. In the context of European security, it is indisputable that Uncle Sam has become Uncle Sucker. In 2022, only 8 of the 29 non-U.S. NATO members were spending the agreed-to 2 percent of GDP on defense, and of those 8, only Poland and the United Kingdom bring meaningful military power to the alliance. The others who meet the 2 percent standard are tiny, militarily weak states.

The United States is the primary security provider in Europe, despite the fact that the most important parts of Europe for U.S. security are profoundly safe, and even the European periphery is mostly secure.

Moreover, the consequences of European shirking have grown higher. At least during the Cold War, U.S. efforts were focused primarily on countering the Soviet Union in Europe anyway. The question was the distribution of the burden, not tradeoffs among priorities. Now, three U.S. presidents in a row have insisted that the focus of U.S. military efforts should be on Asia. The war in Ukraine has served as a distraction from that stated priority, just as the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS did for presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. European indifference has led to the deployment of an additional 20,000 U.S. troops to Eastern Europe and a rededication of the United States to play the central role in European security affairs.

Every U.S. president since Eisenhower has complained about burden sharing in Europe. None has made much progress. That is in part due to the U.S. emphasis on reassuring its partners and allies at the first sign of trouble. The singular priority for U.S. policymakers throughout the postwar era has been establishing and maintaining the credibility of U.S. commitments. This constant supply of reassurance has encouraged European countries to rely on the U.S. commitment for their defense.

Getting Europe off the security dole is a vital task for U.S. defense policymakers. Several ideas recommend themselves.

First, U.S. policymakers should publicly announce that they have no intention of supporting any further expansion of the NATO alliance. This would send shock waves through Europe, making it clear that U.S. attention to Europe is likely to wane. It would also make clear that the United States has no intention of making security guarantees to Georgia or Ukraine similar to NATO's Article 5—the collective defense provision of the North Atlantic Treaty. This would also likely make the weaker, more vulnerable NATO member states pursue other avenues to secure their own countries.

To drive this point home, U.S. policymakers have more options. One would be to make clear that the next Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) will not be an American, and that the Europeans must settle on a European commander. Since the alliance's inception, the SACEUR has been an American, with his deputy being a European. This arrangement is backward. Europe should be in the driver's seat for European security. Once European states decide on a candidate, the Americans should offer to make his or her deputy an American.

Another way to press the issue is by resuming the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Germany initiated under Trump and rescinded by Biden before the war in Ukraine. Trump had moved to withdraw roughly 12,000 service members from Germany, redeploying some elsewhere in Europe and bringing some home. Biden paused, then rescinded, that move on taking office. Resuming that withdrawal would deliver a shock to Europe in general but to Germany

in particular, which has already begun to walk back the pro-defense measures it instituted after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is worth examining that phenomenon briefly as an example of how burden sharing in Europe doesn't work.

After the start of the Ukraine war, Europeans were shaken from their slumber. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende*, translated as a “watershed” or the change of an era. Scholz announced a €100 billion fund to spend on German defense over the next four years, and that Germany would thereafter meet the 2 percent of GDP target for military spending. The measures had support from large majorities of the German public in all the polling done around the announcement.

However, in the intervening months, things changed. The United States sent 20,000 more troops to Eastern Europe and announced new initiatives it would be taking on behalf of European security. It supported the expansion of NATO, the U.S.-led alliance in Europe. In other words, it recentered European security on the United States.

Shortly thereafter, Germany announced that it would be cutting defense spending. The €100 billion fund would serve to obscure the fact that Germany was, in fact, cutting defense spending. By 2026, at the end of the four-year period covered by the €100 billion, Germany would be spending less on defense than it did in 2022. This phenomenon—where a crisis flares up, European states get good press for stepping up, then the crisis and the stepping up both fade away—characterizes how efforts to distribute defense burdens have worked historically. It is time for the United States to wise up.

A final measure can contribute to forcing the issue on the Europeans. From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the Defense Department was required every four years to submit to Congress a report entitled “Allied Contributions to the Common Defense.” Although this normally involved DOD acting as lawyer for U.S. allies and explaining that if you change methodologies, you can see that our allies are actually doing quite a lot, it provided fodder for discussion in Congress about burden sharing both in NATO and in U.S. alliances in Asia. There has been an effort to reinstate the report in the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act; as of this writing, it is unclear whether that will remain in the bill.

There is also precedent for Congress to examine burden sharing in NATO and other U.S. alliances. In 1988, the House Armed Services Committee convened the Defense Burden Sharing Panel. The panel issued a report stating “in the strongest possible terms that Europeans had better be prepared to defend their own territory without a large-scale U.S. ground commitment, because that commitment cannot be guaranteed forever.” It suggested further that “the major reason the United States is shouldering a disproportionate

share of the defense burden is that . . . [a]s long as Americans pay most of the cost and assume most of the risks and responsibilities for the defense of the free world, the allies will be prepared to let the United States do so.”

The end of the Cold War overtook these admonitions; however, the pathologies that afflict U.S. policy in Europe remain the same. Europe’s exertions on behalf of its own defense are inadequate, U.S. exertions are excessive, and the vaunted transatlantic community has no answer to the problem, or, more often, does not see a problem.

If the executive branch cannot or will not shake U.S. allies in Europe from their willful slumber, Congress should. There is simply no good reason for the United States to be the central pillar of European security in the 21st century. Making clear that NATO expansion is over, insisting that the next Supreme Allied Commander Europe be a European, resuming the withdrawal of troops from Germany and Eastern Europe, and reinstating periodic examinations of allied burden sharing both at the Defense Department and in Congress would go a long way toward getting Europe off the dole and making European defense European.

### **Suggested Readings**

- “Europe Is the Free-Rider Continent.” *The Economist*, February 26, 2022.
- Friedman, Benjamin H., and Justin Logan. “Europe Can Stand on Its Own: The Ukraine Invasion Proves It.” *The Week*, March 20, 2022.
- House Armed Services Committee. *Report of the Defense Burdensharing Panel of the Committee on Armed Services*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988.
- Layne, Christopher. *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.
- Logan, Justin. “Make European Defense European.” *War on the Rocks*, June 10, 2021.
- Posen, Barry R. “Europe Can Defend Itself.” *Survival* 62, no. 6 (2020): 7–34.

—Prepared by Justin Logan