



# The Case for Refashioning NATO



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The national-security threats of yesteryear are gone, but the NATO structure remains the

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by Doug Bandow 

**G**ive 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.