

BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

What is the value of a 'Europeanized NATO' for the United States?

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- Were the European countries of NATO (and Canada) to develop roughly three times today's deployable conventional combat capacity—including much greater use of drones and counter-drone defenses—they could effectively defend NATO's exposed eastern flank, at least initially and for some scenarios.
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- For the United States, there would be enormous benefits from such a European pillar of the alliance that approached America's own likely capacities for waging war in Europe.
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Editor's note: This paper was written for a July 15 Center on the United States and Europe virtual workshop on "The Future of NATO" as part of Brookings's [Reimagining Europe's security](#) project, along with Carlo Masala's "[How can a 'Europeanized NATO' defend Europe with reduced American support?](#)"

NATO has been, and remains, the greatest alliance in human history. That was true through the Cold War, through the 1990s and Balkans missions, through the 2000s and early 2010s in Iraq and Afghanistan, and now again in the period of great-power rivalry since 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea. Earlier this century, when America's NATO allies were at their worst in terms of military burden-sharing, they were still with the United States in the struggle against al-Qaida and ISIS, and through the return of Russian revanchism. Now, with most European

countries starting to do much more to provide for their own security, the benefits of the alliance to the American government and people are even greater.

I don't believe in the premise of a "Europeanized NATO" literally or completely. A "Europeanized NATO," to some, might mean non-U.S. members of the alliance taking full responsibility for the continent's defense. But to me, that is oxymoronic, because NATO by definition and by treaty is an organization through which members in Europe and North America collectively promise to ensure the defense of each other. So logically, a Europeanized NATO is one in which European members take much more responsibility—even primary responsibility, in an ideal world—for the defense of their own continent. If this were to occur, the U.S. (and Canadian) role would then be supplementary rather than foundational.

Were the European countries of NATO (and Canada) to develop roughly three times today's deployable conventional combat capacity—including much greater use of drones and counter-drone defenses—they could effectively defend NATO's exposed eastern flank. That capability would allow such a "Europeanized NATO" to collectively deploy a combined non-U.S. force that would be approximately prepared to defeat Russia in at least certain contingencies there. I believe that this capability can be achieved within the 3.5% of GDP target that NATO has adopted for traditional defense spending—indeed, it might well be achievable at slightly lower levels, but in that case, only if European governments are brutally efficient about how they allocate their military resources.

NATO can become more European, with non-U.S. allies seeking to become an equally strong overall pillar of the alliance. But NATO will not and should not become truly Europeanized—with Europe being independently responsible for its own defense—for the following reasons:

- Even with the United States fully committed to its traditional role of alliance backstop and guarantor, NATO is a long way away from having a robust defense against Russian attack, particularly in the Baltic states, where the geography and topography are too favorable for Russia. Short of NATO establishing a forward defense in the Baltics analogous to the one it maintained in Cold War Germany, with several divisions at its core (which, to be clear, I am not recommending), that is unlikely to change. As a senior NATO official told me, according to official alliance war plans, all NATO countries combined would need to spend 3.5% of GDP on their armed forces for a decade to produce robust defensive capabilities. Without the United States, simple math suggests that the rest of the alliance would need to

spend well over 5% of GDP on military forces for over a decade to create the same aggregate capability—assuming the allies could agree on how to organize and command their combined force structures. That is not politically or strategically realistic—and a decade is a long time to wait, in any case.

- The French force de frappe, even if joined with the U.K.'s nuclear forces, cannot in my judgment plausibly counter Russia's nuclear forces. That is especially true for a scenario in which the vulnerable Baltic states are being threatened or overrun by Russian conventional forces and NATO Europe wants to use nuclear threats to reverse the tide of battle. I do not see such a threat as credible—and, more importantly, Moscow might not either. Russia's nuclear forces are more than 10 times the size of combined U.K./French forces, and we are talking about a scenario in which Paris and London would be asked to risk Toulouse to save Tallinn (or whichever alliteration you prefer).
- While U.S. President Donald Trump often creates anxiety for those of us who support the NATO alliance, we are now five and a half years into his presumed eight years in the White House, and the United States remains a member. We may get through this after all. While Trumpism may outlast Trump in some ways, as Tom Wright has usefully explained [in his new book ↗](#), Trump's outright contempt for the alliance is unlikely to be replicated by a successor—and Trump himself has not yet dismantled the alliance. There is therefore no reason to create a self-fulfilling prophecy by creating a (false) hope that a Europeanized NATO (plus Canada) can become self-sufficient. Such a move would further provide rhetorical ammunition to American political voices who favor U.S. disengagement from Europe.

That said, there are a number of ways in which the United States would enormously benefit from a Europe that could do roughly three times more than what it can do now, in the realm of deployable military force structure. At present, based on estimates by the [RAND ↗](#) Corporation, [Barry Posen of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology ↗](#), the [Atlantic Council ↗](#), [myself](#), and others, European countries could collectively muster at most three to four brigades of ground combat power, and commensurate tactical air power, in a forward defense of the Baltics. If tripled to 10 to 12 brigades, plus logistics and other support plus airpower, Europe and Canada would possess a plausible capability to mount an initial forward defense of the alliance's eastern flank, in my estimation. That would not be nearly enough to be confident for all contingencies—hence the continued need for a major American role, too. But it would constitute a credible and serious fighting capacity.

European allies do not need all of their 100+ existing brigades and associated helicopters and fighter jets to be able to operate in the Baltics; they only need to make 10% to 15% of their total force structure deployable and sustainable in distant theaters. To reach this capability, the big countries of Europe should each aim to be able to deploy and sustain at least two brigades of combat ground power in a region like the Baltics—with each brigade having roughly 3,500 soldiers and backed up by a logistics/support tail probably again twice as large, for a total of about 10,000 soldiers per brigade equivalent—plus associated airpower. Most other countries should aim for a single brigade; some of the smallest members might pair up with a neighbor and provide the brigade together.

For the United States, there would be enormous benefits from such a European pillar of the alliance that approached America's own likely capacities for waging war in Europe. They include the following:

- A "Europeanized NATO," as I am using the term, with a focus on tripling deployable non-U.S. conventional capabilities for defending the alliance's eastern flank, would make it easier for the United States to follow the logic of its widely endorsed national defense strategies of the last decade. At present, even 15 years since the "rebalance" or "pivot" to Asia began, and eight years after Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis's National Defense Strategy prioritized great-power competition with China, the United States has increased the share of its military spending and deployed capabilities devoted to the Asia-Pacific by at most a couple of percentage points.
- A Europeanized NATO could provide the core of an initial defense of the alliance's eastern region, which might prove particularly crucial if the United States were slow to respond to a major crisis in Europe. Such a scenario could occur if the United States was already fighting in another theater (the current U.S. National Defense Strategy is predicated on no more than one war at a time) or because an adversary had compromised the necessary infrastructure to deploy U.S. forces. Knowing this in advance, Vladimir Putin or a future Russian leader would have fewer reasons to think they could pull off a quick win against NATO—thereby strengthening deterrence.
- A Europe that is truly committed to pulling its own weight militarily is also more likely to be seen as capable of contributing to the alliance's eastern members, strengthening aggregate deterrence. A Europeanized NATO would present a united front in which major Western European countries themselves were actively demonstrating that they were truly committed to alliance security too.

- A Europeanized NATO would be pumping enough resources into military modernization and acquisition to develop true complementary areas of excellence that might even exceed America's in some ways, strengthening the overall Western alliance vis-à-vis Russia and China. Right now, Germany may make a better tank than the United States, at least for some topographies, but I am otherwise hard-pressed to identify areas in which America's NATO allies are at the vanguard of alliance military modernization. (Ukraine may make better, more affordable drones, but it is unlikely to ever join the alliance.)
- A Europeanized NATO would develop defense industrial base capabilities at size and scale that increase the Western world's overall resilience and surge capacity. As we have all learned in recent years, it is incorrect and imprudent to assume one can quickly ramp up production of key military equipment once a crisis occurs, given the nature of modern defense industrial bases and their many bottlenecks and single points of failure. The U.S. defense industrial base is presently inadequate to backstop the alliance's equipment needs; it needs to become deeper and more resilient, but so does Europe's.

Last but not least, a Europeanized NATO can reduce the strength of political forces in the United States that see an ungrateful set of allies with low defense spending across the Atlantic and choose to disengage from NATO as a result. As noted, I do not expect this outcome—but we should all be trying to make it even less likely. A tripling in projectable force by NATO's non-U.S. members, to the point where they could collectively deploy and sustain 10 to 12 brigades of ground power and associated airpower and support, could go far toward achieving this objective.

Right now, Europeans are doing a lot—including not only with their own militaries but, at a level of effort I admire and appreciate, in regard to helping Ukraine. Yet the politics of sustaining support for NATO remain perilous, and future support for the alliance in America, while likely, is far from assured. As long as we collectively avoid giving the impression that Europeanizing NATO translates into American disengagement from Europe, the project makes enormous sense.

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Referenced Links

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2. [How can a 'Europeanized NATO' defend Europe with reduced American support?](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-can-a-europeanized-nato-defend-europe-with-reduced-american-support/) (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-can-a-europeanized-nato-defend-europe-with-reduced-american-support/)
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