

# Policy Analysis

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## *NATO at 60* *A Hollow Alliance*

by Ted Galen Carpenter

### Executive Summary

As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization celebrates its 60th birthday, there are mounting signs of trouble within the alliance and reasons to doubt the organization's relevance regarding the foreign policy challenges of the 21st century. Several developments contribute to those doubts.

Although NATO has added numerous new members during the past decade, most of them possess minuscule military capabilities. Some of them also have murky political systems and contentious relations with neighboring states, including (and most troubling) a nuclear-armed Russia. Thus, NATO's new members are weak, vulnerable, and provocative—an especially dangerous combination for the United States in its role as NATO's leader.

There are also growing fissures in the alliance about how to deal with Russia. The older, West European powers tend to favor a cautious, conciliatory policy, whereas the Central and East European countries advocate a more confrontational, hard-line approach. The United States is caught in the middle of that intra-alliance squabble.

Perhaps most worrisome, the defense spending levels and military capabilities of NATO's principal European members have plunged in recent years. The decay of those military forces has

reached the point that American leaders now worry that joint operations with U.S. forces are becoming difficult, if not impossible. The ineffectiveness of the European militaries is apparent in NATO's stumbling performance in Afghanistan.

NATO has outlived whatever usefulness it had. Superficially, it remains an impressive institution, but it has become a hollow shell—far more a political honor society than a meaningful security organization. Yet, while the alliance exists, it is a vehicle for European countries to free ride on the U.S. military commitment instead of spending adequately on their own defenses and taking responsibility for the security of their own region. American calls for greater burden-sharing are even more futile today than they have been over the past 60 years. Until the United States changes the incentives by withdrawing its troops from Europe and phasing out its NATO commitment, the Europeans will happily continue to evade their responsibilities.

Today's NATO is a bad bargain for the United States. We have security obligations to countries that add little to our own military power. Even worse, some of those countries could easily entangle America in dangerous parochial disputes. It is time to terminate this increasingly dysfunctional alliance.

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*Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author or editor of five books on NATO. His most recent book is Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America (2008).*

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## **Introduction**

NATO celebrates its 60th birthday on April 4. There will be much celebration, not only about the alliance's longevity and past successes, but about its goals in the coming decades. The view that the alliance is both healthy and an essential political and security player in the 21st century is reinforced by the apparent attitude of the new government of NATO's leading power, the United States. The administration of George W. Bush often seemed to prefer a unilateral approach to foreign affairs, and U.S. leaders occasionally exhibited disdain for some of Washington's European allies—recall Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's derisive reference to “old Europe” to describe Germany, France, and other West European countries that were critical of U.S. policy on Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, President Barack Obama's foreign policy team has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to multilateralism in general and NATO in particular. During her confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that Washington's policy should be one of “smart power.” Among other aspects Clinton explained, smart power “means strengthening the alliances that have stood the test of time, especially with our NATO partners and our allies in East Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

The professed optimism on both sides of the Atlantic, though, cannot conceal growing doubts about NATO's relevance to the policy challenges of the 21st century, and, indeed, about the organization's long-term viability. While NATO superficially remains an impressive organization, its ability to be an effective security mechanism is fading rapidly. There's a caustic saying popular in Texas about people who have an impressive reputation but possess few real resources: “all hat and no cattle”: that applies to NATO. There are unmistakable signs of trouble in several areas: the weakness and vulnerability of the new members and prospective new members; clumsy alliance policies that have created serious tensions with

Russia; growing divisions within the alliance over policy toward Russia; NATO's anemic performance in Afghanistan; and the alarming decline in the military capabilities of the alliance's core European members.

## **NATO Expansion: Adding Militarily Useless—and Vulnerable—Members**

At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, alliance leaders gave a green light for eventual membership to two more nations: Croatia and Albania. The Summit Declaration stated: “Today, we have decided to invite Albania and Croatia to begin accession talks to join our Alliance. We congratulate these countries on this historic achievement, earned through years of hard work and demonstrated commitment to our common security and NATO's shared values. The accession of these new members will strengthen security for all in the Euro-Atlantic area.”<sup>3</sup> A third Balkan country, Macedonia, would have received an invitation if it had not been for an unresolved esoteric dispute between that country and NATO member Greece about using the name “Macedonia”—which Athens claims belongs exclusively to a region in Greece.

The proposed addition of Croatia and Albania represents the third round of enlargement for the alliance. That decision also highlights NATO's waning security relevance and increasingly dubious attributes in the post-Cold War era. The addition of small countries with murky political characteristics, trivial military capabilities, and dicey relations with neighboring states is a development that is especially pertinent from the standpoint of America's security interests, given this country's obligations as the leader of the alliance. Adding such members does nothing to augment the vast military power of the United States or enhance the security of the American people. All enlargement does is create another set of potential headaches for Washington.<sup>4</sup>

NATO was once a serious alliance with a serious purpose. Throughout the Cold War,

it prevented the Soviet Union from intimidating or (less likely) attacking democratic Western Europe—a region of considerable strategic and economic importance. True, the United States was always the dominant player in the alliance, but Washington could count on credible secondary military powers, most notably Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Turkey. That is no longer the case.

### **Micro Allies**

The new members the alliance has admitted since the end of the Cold War are weak client states that expect the United States to defend them. That was largely true even of the first round of expansion that added the mid-sized countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. It was more evident in the second round that embraced such tiny military players as Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Such micro allies are security consumers, not security producers. From the standpoint of American interests they are not assets, they are liabilities—and potentially very dangerous liabilities.

Taking on the obligation to defend the Baltic countries was especially unwise, because NATO now poses a direct geopolitical challenge to Russia right on Moscow's doorstep. Relations between Russia and its small Baltic neighbors are testy, to put it mildly. At the moment, Russia may be too weak to challenge the U.S./NATO security commitment to those countries, but we cannot be certain that will always be true.

The endorsement of NATO membership for Croatia and Albania confirms that the alliance has now entered the realm of farce. The military capabilities of those two countries are minuscule. According to the 2009 edition of *The Military Balance*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Croatia's military budget is a mere \$962 million, and its military force consists of 18,600 active-duty personnel. Albania's budget is \$233 million, and its force is 14,295. They will augment Estonia's \$425 million and 5,300 troops, Latvia's \$513 million and 5,187 troops, Lithuania's \$500 million and 8,850 troops, and Slovenia's \$756 million and

7,200 troops. By not offering membership to Macedonia, though, NATO will have to do without Skopje's \$163 million and 10,890 troops.<sup>5</sup> Collectively, those countries spend less on their militaries in a year than the United States spends in Iraq in two weeks.

### **The New Members Are Dangerous as Well as Useless**

Such new allies are not merely useless; they are potentially an embarrassment to the alliance, and possibly a serious danger. When Vice President Dick Cheney asserted during a visit to the Balkans in 2006 that the proposed members would help "rejuvenate" NATO and rededicate the alliance "to the basic and fundamental values of freedom and democracy," he showed how out of touch with reality U.S. and NATO policy had become.<sup>6</sup>

Croatia is just a few years removed from the fascistic regime of Franjo Tudjman and continues to have frosty relations with neighboring Serbia. Albania is a close ally of the new, predominantly Albanian state of Kosovo, an entity whose independence both Serbia and Russia (as well as most other countries) do not recognize and vehemently oppose. Albania also is notorious for being under the influence of organized crime. Indeed, the Albanian mafia is legendary throughout Europe, controlling much of the gambling, prostitution, and drug trafficking.<sup>7</sup>

Efforts to add Ukraine and Georgia to the alliance, a policy that the Bush administration pushed and the Obama administration endorses, would be even worse than the previous rounds of expansion. Ukraine's relationship with Russia is quite contentious. Georgia's relationship, of course, is even worse than that, as last summer's warfare confirmed. Rational Americans should have breathed a sigh of relief that Georgia was not a NATO member at the time the conflict erupted.

Proponents of NATO's enlargement eastward sometimes act as though the alliance is now merely a political honor society. Their underlying logic is that, because the nations of Eastern Europe have become capitalist democracies, they deserve to be members of the West's most prominent club. But nearly all the

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newer members of NATO, which are the most concerned about possible adverse security developments emanating from Russia, consider the alliance to be more than a political body. They are counting on tangible protection from depredations by their large eastern neighbor. And, equally important, Moscow does not view the current incarnation of NATO as merely political in nature.

The Georgian conflict should remind us that NATO is still officially much more than a political club. It remains a military alliance with extensive obligations—especially for the United States. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty proclaims that an attack on one member is an attack on all. That means the United States is obligated to assist in the defense of every member—no matter how small, how militarily or economically insignificant, or how strategically exposed that member might be.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Are NATO's Security Commitments a Strategic Bluff?**

That comes perilously close to being a risky strategic bluff. The war between Russia and Georgia illustrates the hollow nature of NATO's ability to protect small, vulnerable members. True, Georgia was not a member of the alliance, and therefore, Article 5 did not apply. But the country was clearly a client—albeit an informal client—of the United States. U.S. leaders repeatedly hailed Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili as an American friend and as a symbol of democratic reform in that part of the world. The conventional wisdom assumed that Russia would never molest such a client. And the Georgians certainly seemed to expect assistance when trouble arose. As *New York Times* correspondents Andrew E. Kramer and Ellen Barry reported from Georgia during the early days of the fighting, when retreating Georgian troops met Western journalists, “they all said the same thing: Where is the United States? When is NATO coming?”<sup>9</sup> Yet the United States and the rest of NATO did little more than fuss and fume about the Russian military offensive and offer postwar reconstruction aid to Tbilisi. The anemic response of both NATO and the

European Union infuriated hardliners in the West. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial derisively described the policy as one of “Stop! Or We’ll Say Stop Again!”<sup>10</sup>

Some analysts expressed confidence that, if Georgia had been a NATO member, Russia would have been deterred. Columnist George Will, for example, posed the question: “If Georgia were in NATO, would NATO now be at war with Russia? More likely,” he stated, “Russia would not be in Georgia.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps. But there is reason to be skeptical about that conclusion. The reality is that if Washington and its NATO partners endeavored to carry out their commitments under Article 5 because a fight erupted between Russia and a small alliance member, they would risk war with a nuclear-armed adversary. Such a threat may have had reasonable credibility during the Cold War, when the stakes involved keeping democratic Europe—a major economic and strategic asset—out of the orbit of an aggressive, totalitarian power. The declared willingness to risk a war with nuclear implications is far less credible when the *casus belli* is merely a dispute between an authoritarian Russia and one small neighbor—which in the case of the Georgian war was a dispute over the political status of two secessionist regions in that neighbor.

Not only might deterrence lack credibility in that situation, basic prudence should dictate that such a degree of risk not be incurred except in the defense of vital interests. Georgia's troubles with Russia—and for that matter, the various disputes that other tiny nations on Russia's border have with Moscow—do not come close to meeting that test even for Europe's major powers, much less for the United States. It seems more likely than not that Washington, if faced with the terrible potential consequences of confronting Russia militarily over such meager stakes, would blink. And if the United States didn't act, the secondary NATO powers certainly would not. The alliance's nonresponse to Russia's offensive against Georgia suggests that the security expectations of NATO's new members and prospective members may be wishful thinking.



## NATO and Russia: Poking the Bear

A second major problem afflicting NATO is that various policies pursued since the end of the Cold War—especially the alliance’s actions in the Balkans and the expansion of NATO to include new members on Russia’s western frontier—have poisoned relations with Moscow and re-ignited security tensions in Europe.

### Trampling on Russia’s Interests in the Balkans

In 1995, NATO forces intervened in Bosnia’s civil war to undermine the Serbs, Russia’s long-standing co-religionists and political allies. Then, in 1999, the United States and its allies waged an air war against Serbia, ultimately wrenching away its province of Kosovo. They bypassed the UN Security Council to do so, thereby evading a Russian veto. Although Russian political leaders fumed at such treatment, they could do little except issue impotent complaints. The country was too weak to do much else, as both its economy and military were in disarray.<sup>12</sup>

Western policy regarding Russia’s sensibilities and tangible interests in the Balkans has not become more adept with the passage of years. Once again dismissing Moscow’s objections, the United States and its leading European allies bypassed the UN Security Council to grant Kosovo independence in February 2008. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov warned that such a step set a dangerous international precedent that would encourage secessionist movements around the world. America and NATO, he said, had “opened a Pandora’s box.” Ominously, he noted specifically that the Kosovo precedent would seem to apply to Georgia’s secessionist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>13</sup>

Six months later, when the Georgian government tried to regain control of South Ossetia, Russian forces exploited that foolish move and launched a devastating counteroffensive against its southern neighbor. When

those military operations ceased, the Kremlin promptly recognized the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At least in part, Russia’s actions in Georgia appeared to be payback for the West’s actions regarding Kosovo.<sup>14</sup>

### NATO Expansion and Disingenuous Assurances

U.S. and West European officials not only trampled on Moscow’s long-standing interests in the Balkans, they took advantage of Russia’s economic and military disarray during the 1990s to establish a dominant position in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> NATO proponents not only preserved a military institution whose primary purpose was to wage the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union in Europe, they expanded the alliance eastward into Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. That move violated an apparent promise that the administration of President George H. W. Bush had made to Moscow in exchange for the Kremlin’s acceptance of Germany’s reunification and German membership in NATO.<sup>16</sup>

The eastward expansion of the alliance has been accompanied by soothing assurances to Moscow—assurances that increasingly lack credibility. Ronald D. Asmus (who would later serve as a deputy assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration) and other prominent NATO experts argued in 1993: “Extending the alliance eastward should be seen as the West taking a step toward Russia, rather than against it.”<sup>17</sup> Because NATO is now at least as much a political body as a military organization, so the argument goes, Russia has no reason to fear or oppose its expansion—even to Russia’s own border.

Some advocates of expansion even argued that Russia would benefit from enlarging the alliance to include Central and East European countries that had been part of the defunct Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact. The *Washington Post’s* Stephen S. Rosenfeld contended: “By steadying a disruptive-prone slice of Europe on a sensitive Russian border, expansion gives heart and political space to Russia’s liberal Westernizing party and steals a card from the

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conservative and nationalistic party that is given to tension and adventure.”<sup>18</sup> Western officials are still assuring the Russians that an expanded NATO, even one that includes Ukraine and Georgia, poses no threat whatsoever to their country. During a November 2008 visit to Estonia, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asserted that “Russia has no need to impede a sovereign country’s desire to more fully integrate with the West.” Such integration, he stated, “is not a threat to Russia’s security.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet NATO actions (especially those of the United States) belie those assurances. Contrary to promises given to Moscow, NATO has from time to time deployed military personnel and jet fighter aircraft in the Baltic states. The United States has also stressed that NATO must be better prepared to defend those countries from any possible Russian attack.<sup>20</sup> Washington has also struck agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic to deploy ballistic missile defense systems in those countries. Although these systems are ostensibly aimed at defending against Iran’s emerging missile capability, Moscow regards that deployment as a threat to the integrity and credibility of its own nuclear deterrent. In any case, the missile defense system is certainly a military measure, not a gesture one would expect from a merely political organization.

The first round of expansion in 1998 gave membership to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, over the Yeltsin government’s objections. That expansion of the alliance was nonprovocative, though, compared to the second round in 2004 that incorporated (among other countries) Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania—entities that had been part of the Soviet Union.

Russia’s political elite was furious at such behavior, and NATO’s actions badly undermined democratic, pro-Western political forces in that country while strengthening authoritarian nationalist elements. Despite the pervasive sense of anger and betrayal, there was little that Moscow could do at the time except issue impotent complaints. The country was simply too weak, both militarily and economically, to take more serious counter-

measures. But that situation has changed, and Moscow has begun to push back. In particular, the Kremlin has emphasized that attempts to grant NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia cross a bright red line and will not be tolerated.

## **Policy toward Russia Exposes New Fissures in the Alliance**

Policy toward Russia has created noticeable fissures within NATO. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, opposition from Germany, France, and other key long-time members thwarted Washington’s goal of offering a Membership Action Plan (the first stage of preparing a country for admission to NATO) to Georgia and Ukraine. French and German officials argued that adding those countries to the alliance would needlessly provoke Russia and further damage the West’s already tense relationship with Moscow. The summit declaration offered the vacuous promise that “NATO’s door will remain open to European democracies willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership.” In an implicit slap at Russia’s objections to further enlargement, the declaration also emphasized that “decisions on enlargement are for NATO itself to make.”<sup>21</sup>

While that language may have been a consolation prize for the United States and the East European proponents of enlargement, the language regarding the candidacies of Georgia and Ukraine suggested a victory by the West European skeptics. The declaration did affirm that “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations” for membership and signaled agreement “that these countries will become members of NATO.” Instead of offering a Membership Action Plan, however, the summit merely pledged to “begin a period of intensive engagement” to “address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications,” and directed the foreign ministers to assess the progress of those countries in meeting the requirements for membership.<sup>22</sup>

Notably, there was no timetable for admission to the alliance. In terms of the crucial operational details, the West European critics of membership for Georgia and Ukraine prevailed at Bucharest.

Intra-alliance divisions became even more evident in response to the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008.<sup>23</sup> The Central and East European members of NATO were alarmed at Russia's willingness to use force against a small neighbor, and they pressed their alliance partners to take a hard line toward Moscow.<sup>24</sup> As a senior alliance official told the *Times* of London, Russia's near neighbors who are already in NATO "are the ones leading the charge to put the Russian threat" back on the agenda. Because of the Georgian war, "there are NATO members such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states" who want the alliance to concentrate again on "military structures to deter Russia."<sup>25</sup>

Most West European members, though, favored a far more cautious approach, reminding their colleagues that the West needed Russia's cooperation on a variety of issues, including attempts to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions. Germany, France, and other countries also were aware of Moscow's ability to exploit Europe's dependence on natural gas supplies originating in Russia for diplomatic and political leverage. (Any doubts on that score evaporated in February 2009, when Russia's quarrel with Ukraine over the pricing of natural gas led to a virtual shutdown of the pipeline leading to Central and Western Europe.)

The West European countries seem even more reluctant to admit Georgia and Ukraine to NATO following the armed skirmishes between Moscow and Tbilisi.<sup>26</sup> Poland's foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, a leading contender to become NATO's next secretary general, conceded that membership for those two countries was, at best, a "fairly distant prospect." At the moment, he said, there was simply "no will" within the alliance for such enlargement.<sup>27</sup> A senior U.S. official reached a similar conclusion, stating "I think it's fair to predict there would be no NATO membership offer for some years to come."<sup>28</sup>

The response to the Russian-Georgian war indicated that Washington's policy preferences were closer to the hard-line position advocated by NATO's newer (East European) members than they were to the views of America's traditional alliance partners.<sup>29</sup> But the West European governments, especially those in Germany and France, dug in their heels and refused to endorse confrontational proposals.<sup>30</sup> (That reluctance to embrace strong countermeasures also created an East-West policy rift within the European Union, and a testy U.S. response to the apparent victory by advocates of conciliation toward Russia.)<sup>31</sup>

In the end, NATO's response to Russia's coercion of Georgia amounted to little more than feeble diplomatic protests and a temporary suspension of meetings between NATO and Kremlin officials.<sup>32</sup> Russian leaders openly scorned NATO's "empty words."<sup>33</sup> West European leaders did offer one significant concession to the United States—agreeing to endorse the deployment of ballistic missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic, despite Russia's vehement opposition to such a system.<sup>34</sup> The allies did so even though some West European leaders were openly skeptical regarding the wisdom of such a deployment.<sup>35</sup>

One can anticipate further, and increasingly pointed, disagreements among alliance members regarding policy toward Russia. There is little cohesion within NATO about how to deal with that important and sometimes prickly eastern neighbor. Although there were some intra-alliance differences even during the Cold War, those differences are dwarfed by the current disagreements.

## NATO's Faltering Mission in Afghanistan

Key policy divisions among alliance members and the dubious strategy of adding vulnerable, militarily irrelevant members are not the only indications that NATO has lost its bearings and is becoming irrelevant as a serious security player. Another indicator is the fraying alliance mission in Afghanistan.

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Western leaders have repeatedly stated that Afghanistan is a key test of NATO's relevance and effectiveness in the 21st century. If that is true, the alliance is failing that test.<sup>36</sup>

Immediately following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, NATO governments invoked Article 5 for the first time in the history of the alliance. U.S. leaders welcomed the European pledges of support, and the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan soon had a key NATO component.

### **Symbolic Military Deployments**

But early on, doubts began to arise about how serious the European allies were about their military commitments. Indeed, most of the NATO governments seemed to view their troop deployments as personnel for humanitarian relief and nation-building missions rather than for combat operations. The military heavy lifting was, by and large, left to U.S. forces and those of Canada, Britain, and a few other alliance members. In August 2003, NATO formally took command of the International Security Assistance Force, which the UN Security Council had authorized under a peace-enforcement mandate. As Cato Institute research fellow Stanley Kober notes, "ISAF has never seen itself as a war-fighting force." Rather, its goal was to "facilitate the reconstruction of Afghanistan."<sup>37</sup>

In fact, with the partial exception of British, Canadian, and Dutch units, most of the NATO troop contributions amount to little more than military symbolism. The NATO governments can argue that they are contributing to the U.S.-led mission, but in reality most of the deployments are militarily irrelevant. That is true even as overall alliance troop levels in Afghanistan have gradually climbed.

Most NATO members have placed a variety of caveats on the use of their military personnel. Some forbid them from engaging in night operations (which are inherently more dangerous). Others prohibit their forces from being deployed in certain areas of the country—specifically, those areas where significant combat is taking place and where additional troops might actually prove useful.

Germany is one of the worst offenders in that regard. Berlin has kept its troops in the northern regions of Afghanistan, where virtually no fighting is taking place. Despite Washington's repeated requests, the German government has refused to lift that restriction. That might be just as well. A November 2008 German parliamentary report concluded that the country's troops in Afghanistan spent most of their time lounging around and drinking beer, and that many were now too fat and out of condition to be of use in combat operations against the Taliban or al Qaeda.<sup>38</sup>

As America's NATO allies have postured and dithered in Afghanistan, the mission in that country has badly frayed. Over the past three to four years, the Taliban and al Qaeda have regained strength and launched ever more lethal attacks against U.S. and Afghan government forces. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have been deeply concerned about those adverse trends and pressed the European allies to commit more troops.

The response has been decidedly underwhelming. Although the French parliament voted in September 2008 to keep the country's 3,500 troops in Afghanistan, Paris has no current plans to increase that contingent. French Defense Minister Hervé Morin stated bluntly in February 2009 that France has "already made a considerable effort" toward stabilizing Afghanistan and that "there's no question for the moment of sending additional troops."<sup>39</sup> The Netherlands, which despite its size has been one of the more substantial contributors, not only refuses to increase its military commitment, it has also announced that it will begin drawing down its 1,770 troops in 2010. Germany argues that its military is simply too stretched to commit more troops beyond the 4,500 already in the country. Typically, Berlin insists that a larger deployment of combat troops would be superfluous, since the primary focus of the Afghan mission should be on civilian reconstruction.<sup>40</sup>

### **European "Freeloading"**

The lack of seriousness on the part of key



NATO members regarding Afghanistan has irritated even some European officials. In a January 2009 speech, British Defense Secretary John Hutton blasted European governments for failing to bear their fair share of the burden. “Freeloading on the back of U.S. security is not an option if we wish to be equal partners in the transatlantic alliance,” he warned. “Anyone who wants to benefit from collective security must be prepared to share the ultimate price.” Hutton also had an implicit rebuke for Germany and other allies who seemed to believe that humanitarian and nation-building tasks were an adequate substitute for combat responsibilities. “It isn’t good enough to always look to the U.S. for political, financial, and military cover. And this imbalance will not be addressed by parceling up NATO tasks—the ‘hard’ military ones for the U.S. and a few others and the ‘soft’ diplomatic ones for the majority of Europeans.”<sup>41</sup>

That foot dragging also drew the fire of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. “I am frankly concerned when I hear the United States is planning a major commitment for Afghanistan, but other allies are ruling out doing more.” A prominent reason for his discontent echoed Hutton’s concerns: “That is not good for the political balance of this mission. That is not good for the balance inside the North Atlantic alliance.” He warned that the failure of key European members to do more in Afghanistan “makes calls for Europe’s voice to be heard in Washington a bit more hollow than they should be.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the Secretary General feared that U.S. leaders may not take their European partners, or perhaps even the alliance itself, seriously in the future.

But the reluctance of the other NATO members to ramp up their military commitment in Afghanistan is hardly surprising, because the European publics seem strongly opposed to sending more troops. A January 2009 public opinion survey conducted by the *Financial Times* found solid majorities against additional troop commitments. Sixty percent of German respondents took that position, as did 53 percent in both France and Italy.

Even in Great Britain, Washington’s closest ally and the country with the second largest military presence in Afghanistan, 57 percent of those surveyed were hostile to sending additional forces.<sup>43</sup>

Such attitudes stand in marked contrast to public opinion in the United States, where strong support remains for pressing the campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Policy regarding Afghanistan, and seemingly Washington’s entire “war on terror,” is another instance in which there are major fissures developing in the alliance.

## **The Eroding Military Capabilities of the Major European Allies**

NATO’s feckless military performance in Afghanistan highlights a broader problem. Not only are most of the alliance’s newer members marginal military players at best, even the traditional major European allies have allowed their defense establishments to decay. The gap between America’s military capabilities and those of its European partners has grown to be a chasm. U.S. military leaders warn that significant joint operations with other NATO members are increasingly difficult, and may soon become impossible. In other words, the forces of the other alliance members are becoming obsolete and ineffective.

### **Spending and Force Levels Are Plunging**

That is not surprising. With the partial exceptions of Britain and France, the military budgets—to say nothing of crucial spending on force modernization—of the principal West European powers have been in virtual free fall since the end of the Cold War. The spending and force levels of three key members of NATO—Germany, Italy, and Spain—illustrate the problem. Spain devoted 1.85 percent of its gross domestic product to defense in 1989 and deployed more than 274,000 troops and 244 combat aircraft. By 2008, those figures were down to 0.73 percent of GDP, fewer than

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150,000 troops, and 197 aircraft. The plunge in spending and military capabilities for Italy has been equally dramatic. In 1989, the percentage of GDP spent on the military was 1.94, and the country had nearly 390,000 troops and 425 combat aircraft. In 2008, the figures were 0.96 percent, 185,000 troops, and 266 aircraft.<sup>44</sup>

Berlin's precipitous decline in military spending and force levels is perhaps the most disheartening. During the Cold War, West Germany was the front-line state and a crucial military partner in the containment of the USSR. Berlin's military spending in 1989 was 2.27 percent of GDP, and the Bundeswehr had 469,000 active-duty military personnel and 621 combat aircraft. By 2008, spending had shrunk to 1.19 percent of GDP, and the active-duty force was down to fewer than 245,000 troops and 310 combat aircraft. Germany's navy had also shrunk by nearly 50 percent, declining from 208 vessels to 111.<sup>45</sup>

The slippage in Britain and France is also worrisome, although spending levels were higher to begin with and remain at marginally more respectable levels than do those of the other three countries. Yet, Paris, which devoted a modest 2.98 percent of GDP to the military in 1989 and fielded 461,000 troops and 697 combat aircraft, is now spending only 1.54 percent, while force levels consist of barely 249,000 troops and 351 aircraft.<sup>46</sup> For Britain, the figures in 1989 were 3.98 percent of GDP, 306,000 troops, and 583 aircraft. In 2008, the figures were 2.33 percent, fewer than 161,000 troops, and only 356 aircraft. Even the vaunted British navy had shrunk from 206 vessels to 109.<sup>47</sup>

Only four European members have met even the meager goal alliance leaders set several years ago to have all NATO countries spend at least two percent of GDP on defense. By contrast, U.S. military spending (including the expenditures for the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan) is nearly five percent of GDP. Since the American economy is far larger than any of the European countries, five percent of GDP means that Washington's military spending utterly dwarfs the spending of its allies.

But the raw numbers do not fully convey the depth of the problem. Not only are the European countries spending less and reducing the number of such crucial weapons platforms as ships and planes, but the efforts to modernize their forces have been modest, at best. Thus, in many cases, key weapons systems are getting older as well as shrinking in quantity. The European military component of NATO threatens to become a force that is antiquated as well as too small.

In short, the principal European members of NATO have gone from countries that somewhat underinvested in defense during the Cold War to countries whose defense spending levels now fail to meet even the straight-face test. It is no wonder that U.S. military leaders no longer consider most of the allies to be credible partners for joint war-fighting scenarios. In his January speech, John Hutton conceded that NATO's ineffectiveness in Afghanistan is at least partly the result of a "legacy of underinvestment by some European member states in their armed forces."<sup>48</sup>

U.S. policymakers have been worried about the degradation in European military capabilities for some time. As early as the Persian Gulf War in 1991, many European countries had trouble assembling enough planes to airlift their forces to the region.<sup>49</sup> The problems became far more apparent during the 78-day air war against Serbia over the Kosovo crisis in 1999. The gap in capabilities was so great that the United States ended up not only flying the vast majority of combat missions, but also the surveillance and refueling missions as well. Washington also had to provide nearly all the intelligence functions and the bulk of the logistics for the operation. Noting that unsatisfactory situation at a meeting of NATO defense ministers the following year, Secretary of Defense William Cohen pressed the European allies to move faster to close the gap in both spending and capabilities.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of the gap closing, it grew wider over the next two years. Secretary of State Colin Powell admonished his NATO counterparts in May 2002 against the creation of a "two-speed" alliance in which the United

States takes care of an immediate crisis with the application of overwhelming high-tech military power while the other members are largely reduced to being bystanders.<sup>51</sup> A month earlier, U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns stressed a similar theme. “Without dramatic action to close the capabilities gap, we face the real prospect of a two-tiered alliance,” Burns warned. The alliance could become “so unbalanced that we may no longer have the ability to fight together in the future.”<sup>52</sup>

Matters have grown considerably worse since Powell and Burns spoke in 2002. Yet even then, the signs of European security free riding were evident. Nine of the alliance’s European members were already spending less than 2 percent of GDP on defense, with Germany’s anemic 1.4 percent especially worrisome.<sup>53</sup> And the cuts in force structure and weapon systems were already proceeding at a brisk rate. The levels in 2002, though, might be considered robust compared to the situation today.

### **The Burden-Sharing Illusion**

Some American policy experts insist that only by spending even more than the vast sums it already spends on the military will Washington have enough meaningful influence to get the European countries to increase their paltry efforts. Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, denounces the possibility that the Obama administration might slow the surge in U.S. military spending that has taken place since 9/11. Such a move, he contends, “would make it harder to press allies to do more. The Obama administration rightly plans to encourage European allies to increase defense capabilities so they can more equitably share the burden of global commitments. This will be a tough sell if the United States is cutting its own defense budget.”<sup>54</sup>

The notion that the European members of NATO are interested in boosting their anemic military budgets—especially to help the United States handle global burdens, most of which would be outside Europe—is naive.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, Kagan’s argument is a classic case of the triumph of hope over experience. Washington has been encouraging (indeed, often badgering or even begging) the European allies to engage in greater burden-sharing since NATO’s inception in 1949—without much success.<sup>56</sup> That was true even during the height of the Cold War when the United States and the European powers faced a dangerous common adversary, the Soviet Union. Alan Tonelson, a senior fellow at the U.S. Business and Industry Council Education Foundation and a long-time analyst of NATO issues, provides a depressing summary of Washington’s frustrations:

America’s Cold War burden-sharing efforts failed for many reasons. But the main explanation is that U.S. leaders never gave the Europeans sufficient incentive to assume greater military responsibilities. The incentive was lacking, in turn, because Washington never believed it could afford to walk away from NATO, or even reduce its role, if the allies stood firm. Worse, U.S. leaders repeatedly telegraphed that message to the Europeans—often in the midst of burden-sharing controversies.<sup>57</sup>

That historical record suggests that Kagan’s thesis turns the role of incentives on its head. The more likely scenario is that if the United States continues to overspend on the military and implicitly subsidize the security of the European allies, they will be perfectly content to continue that arrangement. Indeed, that is what they have done for nearly six decades. The current economic circumstances may actually increase the tendency to free ride. Given the scope of the European safety nets, domestic political constituencies are likely to pressure their governments to divert even more revenues to welfare programs. There certainly will be few constituencies clamoring to boost military spending—especially when the United States is obligingly taking care of the continent’s security needs, with American taxpayers footing the bill.

**Washington has been encouraging the European allies to engage in greater burden-sharing since NATO’s inception in 1949 without much success.**

**Washington's oversized role in NATO short-circuits a crucial incentive for the European powers to do more for their own defense.**

If Washington wants to maximize the prospects that the NATO members will increase their military spending, U.S. officials need to adopt the opposite course: significantly cut spending and implement a phased withdrawal of American troops from Europe. That alters the incentive structure. Especially with Russia beginning to flex its muscles, prudence would dictate that the European powers take security issues more seriously and create at least respectable military capabilities as basic insurance. To do otherwise would be to risk being vulnerable to escalating pressure from Moscow on a variety of issues.

Kagan himself implicitly conceded the role of incentives in 2003, noting that the Europeans “could easily spend twice as much as they are currently spending on defense if they believed it was necessary to do so.”<sup>58</sup> He viewed with skepticism the European arguments that there are certain “structural realities” in their national budgets, “built-in limitations to any increases in defense spending.” If Europe were about to be invaded, Kagan asked, “would its politicians insist that defense budgets could not be raised because this would violate the terms of the EU’s growth and stability pact? If Germans truly felt threatened, would they insist nevertheless that their social welfare programs be left untouched?”<sup>59</sup>

But threat perception is only one component of the incentive picture. Equally important is whether the countries in question can free ride on an outside protector, or whether they must instead rely on their own military resources for protection. It is that calculation that existing U.S. defense policy, to say nothing of the smothering policy that Kagan and other supporters of U.S. hegemony advocate, distorts in an especially corrosive fashion. Washington’s oversized role in NATO short-circuits a crucial incentive for the European powers to do more for their own defense.

## **NATO in Its Dotage**

All of these developments—the growing policy divisions (especially with regard to

Russia), the addition of small, weak, and vulnerable new members, the alliance’s inept performance in Afghanistan, and the erosion of the military capabilities of Washington’s traditional European partners—confirm that NATO is fast becoming a parody of its former self. It is increasingly little more than a political fraternity rather than a credible security alliance. That is sad, because the alliance was once a serious and capable military association with an important purpose.

That is no longer the case, and there is little prospect that the process of decay can be reversed. Today’s NATO is a hollow shell. The outward appearance is one of an impressive organization—with an abundance of perks for the military brass of member states and a generator of conferences, papers, and studies for a vast network of policymakers and outside experts who benefit from the perpetuation of its venerable bureaucracy. But as Gertrude Stein famously said of Oakland, “there is no there, there.” NATO is no longer an effective or, in most instances, even a credible security alliance. Certainly, NATO in its current form does not advance the security and well-being of the American republic. It is time to terminate this increasingly dysfunctional alliance—or at the very least extricate the United States from it.

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