

Promises, Promises: The Failure of US NATO Burden-Sharing Policy

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The September 11 2001 terror attacks on the United States have not yet triggered a new debate within NATO about transatlantic military burden-sharing. But such a debate over apportioning of global security responsibilities seems inevitable. For the attacks pose an unprecedented security challenge for the entire free world, and shadowy global networks of terrorists will remain threatening as long as international borders remain largely open to commerce. Moreover, a major change in the nature of the burden-sharing debate seems likely. Since burden-sharing became a major Alliance issue some fifty years ago, the United States largely has been content to accept a series of Allied promises to boost military spending and to play a larger role in European and “out of area” defense. These promises have been accepted even though they have been broken consistently.

In part, America’s seeming gullibility reflected Washington’s desire to remain indisputably in charge of transatlantic military and nonmilitary affairs. Surely one of the last things that US leaders have wanted to see since the end of the Second World War has been a Europe fully capable of defending itself, and therefore of pursuing fully independent foreign policies. Most believe that two World Wars have proven Europeans’ incapability of behaving responsibly outside a US military umbrella. But America’s burden-sharing failures have mainly resulted from the peculiar but widespread view in Washington that America needs its Allies at least as much as its Allies need America. Even before the terror attacks, the main source of this bizarre belief – the Cold War – had disappeared. The new pressures of the post-9-11 world could combine with this development to sharpen burden-sharing disputes considerably.

For now, Allied cooperation on international security issues will be seen as directly and importantly affecting the security of the American homeland, as opposed to the security of Allied populations or abstractions such as “global stability.” Consequently, both official and unofficial American toleration of European foot-dragging is sure to shrink considerably. Add these factors to emerging US-European disagreements over the breadth of the anti-terror military campaign, and over responding to the alleged causes of terrorism (e.g., the Arab-Israeli conflict, poverty in the Islamic world), and it is easy to anticipate the burden-sharing debate spinning out of control.

Cold War Burden-Sharing Disputes

Transatlantic burden-sharing disputes predate the Atlantic Alliance itself. The first emerged soon after the Marshall Plan was approved in 1947. In particular, the Truman administration worried that Congress might not fund common defense efforts unless the Europeans played a substantial role. These worries lay behind the US push for a European Defense Community, including the explosively controversial idea of German rearmament.

During the Eisenhower years, US resentment of Europe’s alleged military shirking smoldered for three main reasons. First, France’s fear of Germany eventually torpedoed the EDC – though not the Federal Republic’s rearmament. Second, America’s international financial position deteriorated and the nation ran its first post-Second World War balance of payments deficit in 1958. Third, this problem partly stemmed from growing European trade competition. Eisenhower blamed America’s failure to meet this competition adequately in part on “our heavy defense expenditures at home...”¹

Worsening US economic problems, the Vietnam War, and the dramatic Soviet nuclear build-up heightened burden-sharing pressures during the 1960s as well. In response, NATO members, especially West Germany, increased various forms of compensation to Washington for its global military labors. But these actions (e.g., willingness to hold on to US dollars despite their steadily declining worth) failed to narrow America's international deficits significantly.

By the start of the 1970s, these pressures produced major shocks in Washington's security and economic relations around the world, not merely in Europe. President Nixon not only brought down the Bretton Woods international financial system, but his Nixon Doctrine stated that US Allies would have to assume most of their own conventional defense responsibilities. Frustrated by the Vietnam stalemate and soaring foreign policy costs generally, Congress pressured Europe too, mainly in the form of several resolutions introduced by Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Montana), which urged unilateral US troop withdrawals from Europe. These measures were defeated, but in late-1973 Nixon actually signed a measure threatening to begin US withdrawals in two years unless Europeans began offsetting the costs of these forces.

Nuclear arms and economic issues further aggravated burden-sharing quarrels during the 1980s. Since the 1970s, the Soviet nuclear build-up had increased the risks to the American homeland of providing a nuclear umbrella for Western Europe. Previously, as Moscow seemed keenly aware, a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe could trigger a US tactical nuclear response, and Washington could be confident that the Soviets would not retaliate for fear of igniting a full-scale nuclear war that would damage the USSR far more than the United States. More importantly, this very possibility would deter a Soviet conventional attack to begin with.

With even rough Soviet strategic parity, this critical American edge vanished and two new risks emerged. First, US conventional forces in Europe would be overwhelmed by a conventional Warsaw Pact attack. Second, first use of US nuclear weapons in response could well be suicidal. Worse, both risks to the United States stemmed directly from NATO's conventional weakness in Europe and, in turn, from manifestly inadequate European militaries. By the late 1970s, the situation was vastly complicated by a Soviet build-up in medium-range, or theater nuclear weapons.

Burden-sharing was also greatly affected by growing US-European disagreements over how quickly to pursue détente with the Soviet Union. Transatlantic economic tensions also threatened to spin out of control during the 1970s. The OPEC oil price shocks and resulting stagflation and deficit spending put heavy pressure on leaders throughout the Alliance to cut military budgets, and generated major transatlantic disputes over macroeconomic policy. It became all too easy for American politicians, like Eisenhower before them, to blame the nation's economic ills at least partly on low European military budgets.

By the early 1980s, burden-sharing had become a major US political issue once again. The Reagan administration put itself in an especially difficult bind. Its efforts to mobilize Western public opinion behind hard-line anti-Soviet policies and to strengthen Western defenses roiled West European politics. Yet the perceived new Soviet threat made maintaining transatlantic solidarity more important than ever for Washington. Consequently, US officials soft-pedaled burden-sharing issues. They acquiesced in the NATO Allies' failure to implement the 1979 commitment to increase inflation-adjusted military spending, and burden-sharing pledges actually disappeared from Alliance communiqués.

Burden-sharing pressure in the United States nonetheless grew – including Congressional legislation to cap US force levels in Europe and require Pentagon reports on Allied defense efforts. Indeed, in 1987 a North Atlantic Council ministerial meeting endorsed the West

European Union's efforts to develop "a positive identity in the field of European security within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance."² Yet these initiatives ultimately fizzled due to the final collapse of Soviet communism in 1991. Indeed, hadn't the entire burden-sharing issue become obsolete?

The Results and Failure of Cold War Burden-Sharing Policy

By any reasonable measure, US Cold War burden-sharing efforts failed miserably. Even allowing for Western Europe's relative economic weakness during the 1970s and 1980s, the NATO Allies never accepted defense responsibilities remotely commensurate with their capabilities or interests. As previously mentioned, moreover, this failure magnified the risks of nuclear war for the entire Alliance. At NATO's birth, when Western Europe was still recovering from wartime devastation, the United States dominated total NATO military forces and military spending. Four decades later, when Europe had long since recovered, the United States still dominated these totals.

During the Cold War, burden-sharing patterns shifted significantly only once – during the early and mid-1970s. In 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, the United States spent three and a half times as much on defense as its fourteen NATO Allies combined. A decade later, US spending on its NATO forces had fallen to 42 percent of NATO's total military spending. And as of 1975, total US defense spending had sunk to 6 percent of Gross National Product – still high for NATO, but no longer in a class by itself.³ Due partly to the Reagan military build-up, however, by 1989 the US military still made up 36 percent of NATO's total armed forces (including units outside Europe) and the US share of the Alliance's total military spending had recovered to 64 percent.⁴

These transatlantic defense disparities partly reflected Washington's decision to maintain a volunteer military and most European countries' decision to use a draft. They also partly reflected relatively weak European economic performance during the early 1970s and early 1980s. But to a great extent, Europe's deficient military performance reflected deliberate political choices. For example, in 1975 Europe's NATO members were devoting an average of 9.8 percent of their central government spending to defense. The US figure was 26.2 percent. By 1990, the US level had fallen to 23.5 percent, but the European figure had fallen to 5.3 percent.⁵

At first glance, America's burden-sharing failure is difficult to explain, given its vast power and influence in NATO. But US leaders also pursued the wrong burden-sharing goals. Specifically, throughout the Cold War Washington argued that Allied defense efforts should be judged mainly in comparison to US forces committed to Europe.⁶ Yet however pleasingly symmetrical, a neat split of all responsibilities down the middle offered no advantages from the American standpoint. Even ignoring the obviously central issue of how Western defense efforts measured up against Warsaw Pact forces, it would have been far more sensible to divide Western responsibilities according to the Allies' respective interests in European stability and security. And however great America's stake, the West Europeans' stake unquestionably was far greater. The real reason for emphasizing the even split was calming Congressional and public opinion.

If the main purpose of European defense contributions was indeed to maximize European security, then the most important NATO burden-sharing reality at the Cold War's end was that if the United States had to risk its survival and spend more than \$100 billion annually to protect the world's largest economic region, then that region's defense efforts were sorely lacking.

Yet the biggest obstacle to American burden-sharing efforts was self-imposed. The United States never gave the Europeans sufficient incentives because Washington never believed

that it could afford to walk away from NATO, or even reduce its role, if the Allies balked. Worse, US leaders repeatedly telegraphed that message to the Europeans – often in the midst of burden-sharing controversies. This diplomatic ineptitude became apparent almost as soon as burden-sharing controversies began. In 1953, for example, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened to begin an “agonizing reappraisal” of America’s entire foreign policy, including NATO, if the Allies refused to create a viable European Defense Community that included German forces. But throughout early 1954, American policymakers also labored mightily to assure the Europeans that America’s NATO commitment remained firm – that is, that no major reappraisal would take place.⁷ Such contradictory and self-defeating statements continued to be made through the Cold War’s end.⁸

Post-Cold War Burden-Sharing

The winding down of the Cold War led all NATO members to accelerate a reduction in military spending that had begun in the mid-1980s. Yet not only did the gap among relative US and West European defense burdens continue to widen, but a new burden-sharing controversy opened up – over so-called out-of-area regions.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, NATO has officially recognized that “events outside NATO boundaries can bear directly” on the security of member states. In December 1980, the Defense Planning Committee “took note” of Washington’s military plans for Southwest Asia and acknowledged that various Alliance members might be forced to divert units from Europe to protect NATO’s interests in areas such as the Persian Gulf. But NATO members without long-range power projection capabilities (i.e., all members except the United States and possibly Britain and France) were simply obliged to provide host nation support for the reinforcement of units temporarily sent outside Europe.⁹ By the eve of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, references to out-of-area contingencies had disappeared from NATO policy and planning documents.

The Gulf War and the heavy dependence of NATO’s European members on Persian Gulf oil did refocus the Alliance on these out-of-area burden-sharing issues. Yet by most reasonable standards, the Allies flunked the test – despite more than three decades of burden-sharing promises and frequent praise on the subject from Washington. When the ground war began in February 1991, a total of 844,650 coalition troops (including air and naval personnel) had been deployed to the Gulf. Of these, 523,000 were American, and many of the rest came from non-NATO allies. The coalition also deployed 2,614 total aircraft, of which 76.1 percent were American. Less than 7 percent came from NATO-Europe.¹⁰

The Bush administration’s global “responsibility-sharing” campaign was more successful. Of the \$61 billion worth of incremental costs incurred by the US military during the Gulf build-up and War, America’s Allies reimbursed nearly \$54 billion. But these results hardly represented a triumph of *NATO* burden-sharing. Roughly two-thirds of these commitments came from Gulf states, and Japan contributed most of the rest. Germany was the only NATO member to make a significant contribution – just under \$6.5 billion. Just as important, the NATO Allies rebuffed a US request for an official, coordinated Alliance response to the Gulf crisis.¹¹ Nevertheless, responsibility-sharing appeased many Americans. NATO pronouncements congratulated the Alliance for a superb joint performance, and US leaders hailed the burden-sharing status quo too.¹²

At the same time, NATO leaders and supporters seemed to sense serious problems, for a new Alliance Strategic Concept was in the works. Released at the Rome Summit in November 1991, this blueprint highlighted and suggested a relationship between two new themes: first, that new threats to European security were beginning to replace the classical Warsaw Pact invasion; and second, that more progress was needed on militarily strengthening NATO’s “European pillar.” Clearly eyeing the increasingly violent breakup of

Yugoslavia, the summiters contended that the new threats, like “ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes”, required multi-faceted responses – political, as well as military. Consequently, institutions like the WEU and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) also had key roles to play in NATO security affairs. NATO leaders added that “The creation of a European identity in security and defense will underline the preparedness of the Europeans to take a greater share of responsibility for their security.”¹³

In June 1992 NATO agreed to a UN Security Council request to support peace operations in Bosnia, and soon announced that it was prepared to support “on a case-by-case basis” other such missions. At Washington’s insistence, however, NATO left Yugoslavia off its list of declared responsibilities, seeming, thereby, to rule out a combat role for the Alliance. This apparent US belief that a problem at the European Allies’ doorstep did not affect vital US security interests convinced many Europeans that, with the end of the Cold War, America’s perceived stakes in Europe’s security and stability would indeed lessen. Accordingly, signs began appearing of greater European determination to fill the gap – notably, rapid progress on the single market program for the (then) European Community and intensified French efforts to bring to life the WEU’s goal of a European Security and Defense Identity. In October 1991 the EC announced its intention to operate a joint Eurocorps that would enable the Europeans to respond independently to Yugoslav-type crises, and Jacques Poos, an EC Balkans negotiator, went so far as to proclaim that “the hour of Europe has come.”

Yet three towering obstacles quickly became apparent. First, the Europeans were seriously divided on how to handle Yugoslavia. Second, despite numerous Alliance decisions and resolutions, the Bush administration had decided that the French-led Europe-only military cooperation drive was a dangerous threat to NATO and to America’s world leadership. Third, after decades of ostensible burden-sharing progress, the European Allies still lacked the military means to handle even small bushfire wars.

Under President Bill Clinton, the United States showed signs of genuinely welcoming European defense efforts that were not only stronger, but more independent. Yet inadequate militaries undermined the European role in the Balkans throughout the 1990s. The end of the Cold War should have represented a golden opportunity for the European Allies to narrow and even close the gap between their security forces and their security challenges. But the Europeans continued to respond to the transformed security landscape by shrinking their militaries. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, NATO’s European members cut their military budgets by 22 percent in real terms from 1992 to 1998. US military spending shrank even more during the decade – by 40 percent. But the US base was much larger. At least as important, the new Balkans-style troubles are greater threats to the European members of NATO than to America.¹⁴

That observation, however valid, has traditionally been considered the greatest heresy in transatlantic relations. The alliance’s fundamental tenet is that its members’ security is indivisible. Until the mid-1990s, only NATO critics contended anything else. But in a little-noticed revolutionary change in NATO doctrine in 1994, the Alliance itself conceded that divisibility was an inescapable fact of post-Cold War transatlantic security relations. At their Brussels summit in January 1994, the NATO Heads of State agreed to authorize the European members to develop “separable but not separate capabilities which could respond to *European* requirements (emphasis added) and contribute to Alliance security.” As explained by NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana three years later, “[W]e should not expect the US to lead every action or contribute to every operation. There may be times when a European-led force would be appropriate.”¹⁵

Yet the new doctrine of “subsidiarity” posed a fundamental problem for the Alliance. If European crises like the Balkans were indeed local, what disciplined definition of national self-interest would militate for any US involvement in the first place? If such situations were

unimportant enough to permit relatively weak, inexperienced European militaries to handle them, why should Washington get involved at all?

As throughout the Alliance's existence, however, the United States ultimately chose to subsidize NATO-Europe's military inadequacy by dominating the Alliance's military operations in the Balkans once the decision to intervene was made. Although Balkans' militaries were pygmies compared with the former Soviet Union or even Saddam Hussein's Iraq, US forces comprised one-third of the original 60,000-strong Implementation Force (IFOR) sent to Bosnia in 1995 to enforce the Dayton peace accords. As of spring 1999, more than one-fifth of the troops in the less potent, follow-on Stabilization Force were still American. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair sadly noted, "We [the Europeans] thought we could deal with the Bosnian crisis alone. The guns over Sarajevo destroyed that illusion along with much else. Washington in the end had to get involved to provide the military muscle for our diplomacy."¹⁶

Revealingly, the most devastating indictment of America's NATO burden-sharing efforts for the entire post-Second World War period came during the Alliance's most recent military operation in Kosovo. Half a century after NATO's founding, the European Allies still had not outgrown military pygmy status relative to the United States. Indeed, as even most NATO supporters admitted, in many ways, the military gap between the United States and its Allies is as wide as it has ever been since the Vietnam War.

As has often been the case in NATO's history, this latest burden-sharing development was preceded by repeated burden-sharing promises and much hype about progress. In 1994, the Brussels summiters who endorsed the European Security and Defense Identity predicted that the Europeans would be able "to take greater responsibility for their common security and defense." Meanwhile, the Pentagon's burden-sharing reports continued to highlight the progress and contributions being made by the Allies, and to soft-pedal or excuse whatever shortcomings the record revealed. Indeed, the Pentagon credited US burden-sharing efforts with creating "an increased awareness of our concerns in Allied capitals."¹⁷

Significantly, in non-NATO contexts the Europeans were making exactly the opposite points at this time. Prime Minister Blair wrote in 1998: "If Europe wants America to maintain its commitment to Europe, Europe must share more of the burden in defending the West's security interests." And according to no less than the Assembly of the WEU, "[W]e now find ourselves in a situation of dependence and imbalance that is extremely disadvantageous to Europe and even to our American interests."¹⁸ This dependence and imbalance were precisely what was revealed by the Kosovo intervention. By some measures, the European share of the Kosovo burden was larger than its share of Gulf War operations ten years before – e.g., in percentage of strike sorties flown by combat aircraft. Yet according to one published estimate, the United States still bore between 65 and 75 percent of the conflict's costs.¹⁹

But even assuming that the Kosovo conflict addressed a threat to US national security as grave as Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, such figures only hint at the gap between the US and Allied roles in Kosovo. In particular, they belie the picture drawn by Washington and NATO of a European pillar even determined to stand on its own, much less able to do so. For example, although the European Allies had some two million military personnel when the operation started, only 2 to 3 percent of these troops could handle such missions, largely because readiness was so poor. In particular, European units were hampered by a shortage of engineering, communications, medical, and other specialists, by an almost complete lack of long-range airlift capability, a lack of laser-guided bombs, unmanned aerial vehicles, and, in some cases, secure radio networks for pilots.²⁰

The Kosovo campaign seemed to jolt the Alliance out of its burden-sharing complacency. Then Secretary of Defense William Cohen declared in Germany in late 1999, "We cannot afford the disparity of Alliance capabilities we witnessed this spring. The disparity of capabilities, if not corrected, could threaten the unity of this Alliance."²¹ Europe's military failure in Kosovo even prompted the fifteen leaders of the European Union to meet in June 1999 and approve a concrete plan for giving the organization a military arm that would replace the ineffectual WEU. The EU leaders promised to appoint a single foreign policy and security "czar" by late 2000, to create and staff an EU command headquarters, and place the WEU's 60,000-strong Eurocorps at the EU's disposal.

Yet many reasons for skepticism are still in place. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, most European military budgets continued to fall in inflation-adjusted terms. The qualitative picture is no better. According to former Defense Secretary Cohen, the Europeans' military spending is still so inefficient that "NATO countries spend roughly 60 percent of what the United States does, and they get about 10 percent of the capability."²²

Conclusion

After 50 years of broken promises, there can be no doubt that significant NATO burden-sharing progress will never be made as long as the United States trumpets how vital Europe's security and stability are to America's, and acts as the hammer of first resort whenever unrest breaks out in whatever remote corner of the continent. Game theory and common sense both make clear why the Allies will not act until they have an incentive to do so. Today's relatively benign European security environment provides the perfect opportunity for Washington to change the incentive structure.

NATO doctrine, repeatedly endorsed by Washington, now classifies Balkans-type conflicts as situations in which the North Atlantic Treaty does not apply. The United States, in other words, has absolutely no obligation to become involved. European endorsement of subsidiarity, plus the noises that Europeans periodically make about developing autonomous defense capabilities, indicate that the Allies understand this reality. US policy, however, still presents two related obstacles. First, although the Clinton administration supported "separable but not separate" European military capabilities, the Bush administration is filled with officials who harbor grave doubts – at best. As a result, there is little chance in the foreseeable future of the United States adopting the unilateral measures – primarily, force reductions – required to prod the Allies into taking significant action.²³

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Notes

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