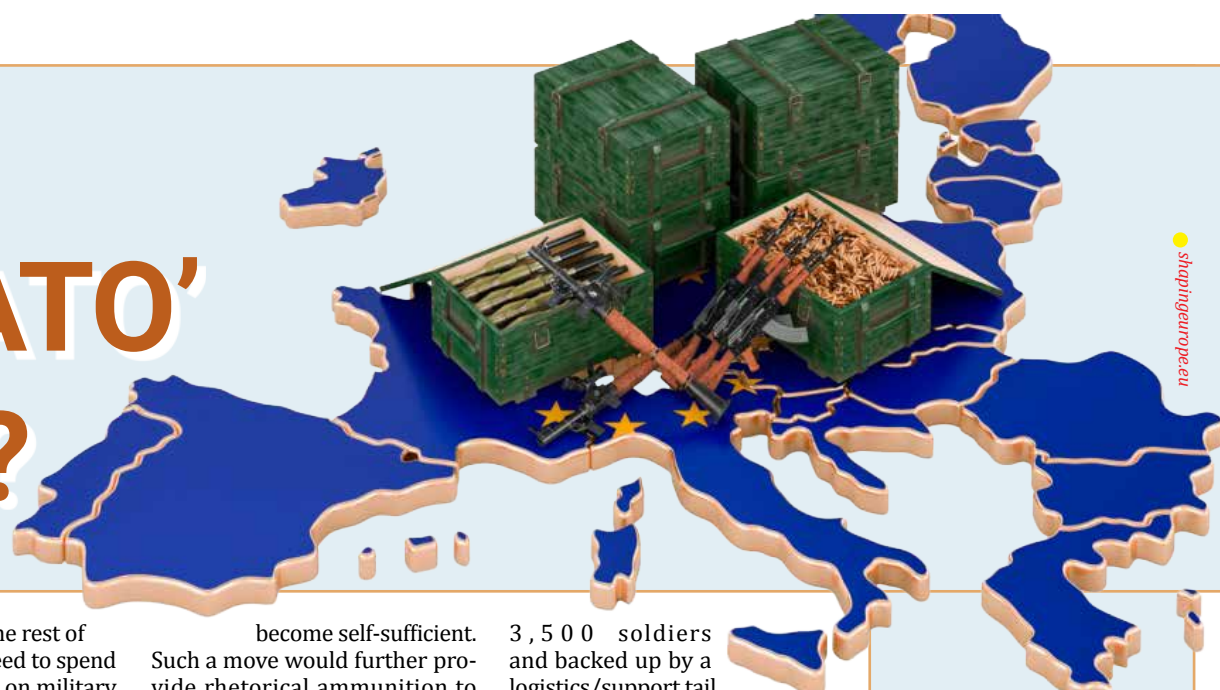


What is value of 'Europeanized NATO' for United States?



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OPINION

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 attacked 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 Daesh (ISIS). 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-US 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 US (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-US 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-US 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 UK'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 UK/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 US 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 US 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-US 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 former 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



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A soldier operates a drone jammer MANPAD type "Bronson" during the NATO exercise STEADFAST DART 26 in Bergen, Germany, on February 19, 2026.

• LIESA JOHANNSEN/REUTERS