

## Why the United States Needs a Cohesive NATO

*By Ben Hodges*

If a conflict with China arises, the United States will need a strong, cohesive NATO, as well as other partnerships around the world to maintain order and security in Europe's neighborhood, and perhaps even beyond. The United States remains committed to Europe's security and stability. But it also expects its European allies to pick up their share of the burden for collective security so as to help maintain order in the continent and around the globe. It is of vital importance to the United States that its defense and security relationship with European countries, especially within NATO, not only remains healthy but is correctly oriented to current and likely future challenges.

Several things remain to be achieved if Europe and the United States in this regard. First, they must build a common approach not only in defense, but across economic, information, and political domains. Second, they must solve the continued inequity in burden sharing that hinders a stronger relationship between them and erodes the confidence of many Americans in the efficacy of NATO. Third, it is necessary to achieve greater coherence on NATO's eastern flank, particularly in the Black Sea region. Fourth, NATO must continue its efforts to improve its deterrence capability against Russia's aggressive behavior.

The interests and responsibilities of the United States are global, with freedom of navigation on the seas and preservation of the global commons being prime examples. Its allies and partners benefit from these freedoms as well, but these have now come under threat, most notably in the South China Sea and with China's growing control over much of the infrastructure of the world, particularly in Europe and Africa. The threat from China is real and growing, and if it materializes the United States will need a strong, cohesive NATO, as well as other partnerships around the world to maintain order and security in Europe's neighborhood, and perhaps even beyond, while the majority of its forces and capabilities, particularly air and naval ones, are operating in the Pacific theater.

The stability, security, and economic prosperity of the United States are directly linked to that of Europe. The bulk of its global economic relationships are in North America and the European Union, and the majority of its most reliable allies and partners are in Europe. To give but one example, the shared intelligence obtained from Europe is essential to the implementation of the recently published U.S. National Defense Strategy. In this context, it is of vital importance to the United States that its defense and security relationship with European countries, especially within NATO, not only remains healthy but is correctly oriented to current and likely future challenges.



## The U.S. Priority: China

A war between China and the United States is not inevitable, but the next 15 years could see the eruption of such a conflict. While this may not reach the threshold of full-scale war or a nuclear conflict, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have set their country on a trajectory that will lead to a strategic situation that may result in sustained armed conflict, potentially stretching across the Pacific region, in all domains. Furthermore, the combination of China's huge population, export-oriented economy, and lack of natural resources could generate an inexorable push towards conflict.

The CCP leadership has emphasized the development of military capabilities that could deny the U.S. navy access to the South China Sea, including long-range air and missile defense and anti-ship capabilities. This anti-access area denial (A2AD) capability does not depend on a large Chinese navy but instead uses well-protected, land-based systems. The creation of artificial islands in the region, most of which are already being armed and garrisoned with A2AD capabilities, are violations of international law and agreements that clearly demonstrate the CCP's strategy and intentions.

Enforcement of freedom of the seas and recognized international waters by the United States and others is necessary to counter these policies. In one recent demonstration of CCP intent, there was a near-collision incident between Chinese and U.S. navy ships, caused by unsafe and unprofessional behavior by the Chinese one. Statements by the China's minister of defense during his recent visit to the Pentagon, including demands that the U.S. forces stay away from the artificial islands, indicate that his country will continue to push aggressively its territorial claims.

Meanwhile, in Europe China has become an increasingly significant and potentially divisive influence in a variety of aspects; especially in infrastructure, technology transfer, and trade. The Belt and Road Initiative has resulted in dramatic

increases in Chinese investment in Europe, control of hundreds of European companies, and ownership or control of more than 10 percent of Europe's ports.

These developments, and the CCP's strategy and behavior, are cause for concern about the potential for conflict with China within the next 15 years. They also show why the United States must prepare for this eventuality.

“*The United States' commitment to European partners like Ukraine and Georgia remains very strong.*”

During the Cold War, the United States used a “two and a half wars” framework for force structure. This was not a strategy, but rather a mechanism meant to assess how much capability and capacity its armed forces needed to deter effectively and, if necessary, win simultaneous conflicts in two different operational theaters and “hold” in a third, minor theater at the same time, for as long as necessary.

Today, and for the foreseeable future, the United States can no longer exercise this capability and capacity. Therefore, in the event of conflict with China, it will need a strong, cohesive NATO as well as partnerships around the world in order to continue deterring a revanchist Russia and to carry on counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East while the majority of U.S. forces and capabilities are operating in the Pacific.

## The U.S. Commitment to Europe

Many European leaders have expressed uncertainty about the United States' commitment to Europe, based on President Barack Obama's “pivot to the Pacific” and, more recently, President Donald Trump's questioning of the relevance and value of NATO and the EU. The facts on the ground, however, demonstrate that the

United States, including the current administration, is fully committed to its long-time allies and partners in Europe.

Everything promised by the Obama administration at the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw is being delivered by the Trump administration: a rotational armored brigade combat team, pre-positioned equipment for an army armored division, and the Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Poland. The administration just announced an additional 1,500 soldiers in an artillery brigade and short-range air defense battalion that will be assigned to Europe. The operational contingency fund, known as the European Reassurance Initiative, which started during the Obama administration, has increased steadily over the last three years and is now known as the European Deterrence Initiative, reflecting U.S. backing for Europe and deterrence of Russia. Also telling was the Senate vote just prior to this year's NATO's summit in Brussels, which affirmed by a 98:2 margin U.S. support for Article 5.

The United States' commitment to European partners like Ukraine and Georgia also remains very strong, as evidenced by provision of the Javelin anti-tank weapon system, other equipment, and training, as well as continued support for these countries' eventual membership in NATO and the return of their territories from Russia.

## U.S. Perspectives on European Military Capabilities and Strategic Autonomy

Europe is responding to these U.S. initiatives with increased investments, adaptation of NATO's command structures, increased training and readiness, and renewed efforts within European frameworks to improve security and defense capabilities. The United States will continue to welcome any increases in the capability of its European allies and partners to contribute to

collective security and defense, and to take on more responsibility for the burdens of global security and stability.

The creation of the Permanent Structure for Cooperation framework is particularly encouraging in that it is legally binding and is already showing promise, with key projects such as the one on military mobility. Efforts to create a larger EU military structure, however, might be met with less enthusiasm. Parallel to NATO, such a structure would create redundant and unnecessary capabilities, and draw away the officers needed to fill existing European commitments to the alliance.

Some European leaders have called for European security autonomy. However, the notion of autonomy is confusing and poorly understood, even in Europe, let alone in the United States. Even the latter does not have unlimited autonomy: it seeks allies and builds coalitions for everything it does. Furthermore, the United States does not have the capacity nor the desire to carry out missions alone, as, for example, in Afghanistan, Libya, or Syria.

However, if a more independent European security policy was to move forward in a spirit of transparency while consciously avoiding redundancy, the United States would likely be supportive. Having European troops on counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and peacekeeping missions in Africa is a welcome form of burden sharing. Undoubtedly, the United States depends on European countries to lead in solving European problems, and to take on a greater share of collective security in Europe; for example, with air and missile defense, intelligence, and logistics. European help in the Middle East and even in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific further contributes to burden sharing.

## What Needs to Be Done

Several things still remain to be achieved if Europe and the United States are to get to the point where they need to be. First, they must build a common approach not only in defense, but across economic,

information, and political domains as well. Inconsistencies in the behavior of some European countries that pursue political and economic policies that are counter to transatlantic security efforts are unhelpful, particularly with respect to the deterrence of Russia and countering the growing threat from China. As Assistant Secretary of State Wess Mitchell recently stated, “We expect those whom America helps to not abet our rivals. Western Europeans cannot continue to deepen energy dependence on the same Russia that America defends it against. Or enrich themselves on the same Iran that is building ballistic missiles which threaten Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States supports the the Three Seas Initiative as a way to build energy independence for Central and Eastern Europe as well as improving infrastructure connection between Northern and Southern Europe – all of which will enhance Europe’s stability, security, and prosperity. Additional investment by the United States and Western European countries into Central and Eastern Europe would be an effective way to counter attempts by Russia and by China to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe, and between European countries.

Second, continued inequity in burden sharing hinders a stronger relationship between the United States and Europe, and it erodes the confidence of many Americans in the efficacy of NATO. Addressing the realities and the perceptions of this inequity is important to address a sense of unfairness and unmet expectations in the United States. The 2 percent defense spending pledge of all NATO members at the Wales Summit in 2014, notably including using 20 percent of their spending to invest in major new equipment and related research and development, is an important step forward as well as a strategic message to Russia that the alliance is prepared to address the changed security environment. These investments are the necessary underpinning for all that must be done for deterrence, defense, and

projecting stability. To paraphrase NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, it was acceptable to reduce defense investment when tensions were low but it is also important and necessary to be willing to increase them when tensions rise.

The need for European countries to increase defense spending is nothing new. Every president since Dwight Eisenhower has challenged the United States’ European allies to do more. Even President Obama called some European countries “free riders”. Thanks to the efforts of Stoltenberg and many national leaders, including President Trump, the alliance has made meaningful progress with most members at or on a path to achieve the 2 percent obligation by 2024. Nearly every one of them has increased their defense spending or at least halted falls in it.

In reaching the necessary spending threshold, a more sophisticated definition of burden sharing and the 2 percent goal is required. Investments must be oriented towards collective security, and to do so the focus must shift from inputs to outcomes.

Stoltenberg has referred to the “Three Cs”: cash, capabilities, and contributions. The transatlantic allies must invest today what is required to develop capabilities tomorrow to make operational contributions the day after tomorrow. Many of these required capabilities are not purely military, nor are they financed by the budgets of the various Ministries of Defense. Transportation infrastructure is well below what is needed for fully effective deterrence or, if deterrence fails, operational requirements. Cyber protection is necessary for all the airports and seaports the alliance needs for rapid reinforcement and sustainment. Fuel pipelines that reach into potential operational fields are necessary. Protected fiber communications networks need to be in place ahead of a crisis for moving rapidly forces from across the alliance. NATO member states need to improve or build highways, bridges, and tunnels that can accommodate larger vehicles. This is particularly the case in Central and Eastern Europe because modern military vehicles, such as German Leopard tanks or

<sup>1</sup> A. Wess Mitchell, „Remarks at the Atlantic Council“, October 18th 2019, <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2018/286787.htm>



U.S. Abrams tanks, are much heavier and larger than those that were typically used in former Warsaw Pact countries.

These are not military-specific capabilities but they are essential for everything NATO does or will need to do. National defense investment could be incentivized by counting spending on these essential capabilities if they have demonstrable, dual-use military value.

Third, it is necessary to achieve greater coherence on NATO's eastern flank, particularly in the Black Sea region. A new sort of Iron Curtain has developed with Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey on one side and Russia on the other, along with NATO's partners Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Russia has almost 10,000 soldiers occupying Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. It has over 25,000 soldiers in the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula and thousands of soldiers aiding separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. In the Sea of Azov, Russia has built a bridge across the Kerch strait, connecting its mainland to Crimea. This effectively blockades Ukrainian ports because the bridge is too low to allow the passage of many commercial vessels that would normally carry Ukrainian steel from Mariupol to different markets. This was intentionally done to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and stop its efforts to join the West. It can also lead to a dangerous military escalation, as illustrated by the recent seizing of Ukrainian naval vessels by Russia. All of these activities are part of Russia's overall effort to extend its control and influence in the Black Sea region, which is vital to its operations in Syria, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Europe needs to maintain its sanctions until Russia lives up to the Minsk Agreement and returns Ukraine's occupied territories. It should also continue to support eventual membership in the EU and NATO by Georgia and Ukraine. Georgia should be invited to join NATO immediately.

Fourth, NATO must continue its efforts to improve its deterrence capability against Russia's aggressive behavior. Deterrence requires having the real

capability to compel a potential adversary. This is not simply a matter of equipment or formations, but rather recognizing Russia's new approach to conflict, which seeks to blur the distinction between peacetime and wartime, to use cyber and misinformation to prevent political and military leaders from realizing what is happening, and then to intimidate and coerce using the threats or even force necessary to achieve its objectives.

Underpinning this capability are three different "speeds". First, speed of recognition. This means using all means necessary to identify rapidly a situation before it becomes a true crisis. This requires that the EU and NATO improve intelligence sharing and communications, networks that will certainly be under stress and likely targeted by cyber-attacks.

Second, speed of decision. Political leaders will need to make decisions quickly in order to allow military commanders to start the movement of equipment, units, and materiel when necessary. At the same time, they will want to avoid doing anything that looks provocative or escalatory. This means, for example, that planners cannot assume that governments will automatically waive normal EU road restrictions, prioritize military convoys over civilian commercial traffic on highways, or give priority to military equipment on rail over previously scheduled commercial shipments. Thus, most if not all initial reactions will happen in peacetime conditions.

Third, speed of assembly. This is key in order to give political leaders options other than a liberation campaign. The transatlantic allies must be able to move quickly to demonstrate to Russia that NATO is prepared, determined, and positioned to protect its members and key interests. This is why military mobility, essential for effective deterrence, is already identified and supported as a priority by NATO and the EU. This is the perfect nexus for their cooperation, one that was emphasized at the NATO summits in Warsaw and Brussels.

As they transition from expeditionary operations to a deterrence posture, European members and partners of the transatlantic alliance must regain a culture of readiness where equipment, formations, and headquarters are all able to perform their assigned missions. Having units that are not fully manned or trained, or expensive vehicles or aircraft or ships that are not properly maintained are clear signals that the alliance is not prepared to defend its members – and thus increases the risk of miscalculation by Russia.

## Conclusion

The United States is committed to the stability and security of Europe, as it has been for over 100 years ever since the first U.S. soldiers arrived in France during World War I. This has been demonstrated regardless of who has been in the White House and which party controlled Congress. The American people have a special affinity for Europe, and the economic prosperity of the United States depends on the continent's security and stability. But they also expect that their European friends and allies will pick up their share of the burden for collective security so as to help maintain order around the globe and ensure that Europe remains whole, free, and at peace.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

## **About the Author**

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