

NATO's Force Generation and Deployment

By Jim Townsend

Faced with heightened aggression from the East, European and U.S. perceptions of NATO are diverging. There is a perceived reluctance among Germans to put their weight behind defense cooperation, a shortcoming which President Trump has emphasized repeatedly in the past and which will no doubt underpin his rhetoric at the NATO Brussels Summit, as well as a general reluctance to funnel money into militaries across Europe.

In view of the gap in NATO's capabilities, and in view of the renewed emphasis on equitable transatlantic burden-sharing, it is not certain that NATO will be able to deliver the forces and capabilities it needs to balance the burden of defending Europe. Over the next two years, we will see Brexit's impact on collective defense, Chancellor Merkel's influence over her new government's defense policy will become clear, and Macron will demonstrate whether he can sustain increased defense spending. These variables point to three separate scenarios to determine the outlook for NATO's ability to generate and deploy forces by 2021.

What is at Stake, and Why Trump Matters

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Allies agreed that NATO had three core tasks: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Of these core tasks, collective defense was considered to be the first among equals. Allies were reminded of this after Russians took Crimea and drove west into Ukraine. Suddenly, crisis management and cooperative security were put on the backburner and all efforts went into strengthening collective defense to deter further Russian aggression. Most Allies, especially from the frontline states, urged that in order to deter and defend against the Russian threat, more U.S. troops were required in Europe. However, to the Trump administration, and to a great many Democrats too, the answer is not more U.S. troops in Europe but more NATO troops from Europe.

Tensions over the age-old issue of burden-sharing have worsened. NATO is asking Allies to increase defense spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2024 so that the Alliance will have the resources it needs to strengthen deterrence, such as deploying battlegroups to the Baltics and Poland, or to fight the Russians if deterrence breaks down. For many Allies, this will be a struggle, causing the United States again to carry the load. However, the new U.S. President has no tolerance for this situation of imbalance that has existed for years, and has made burden-sharing his top priority when dealing with Europe. He has darkly warned that his motivation to assist Allies may be shaped by how much they spend on defense.



The fact is that NATO needs to have more forces on hand, at a higher state of readiness, and with more capabilities — and it needs to speed up its political decision-making to both generate and deploy those forces. It also needs to make force deployment quicker and smoother across Europe. However, to deal with this problem of burden-sharing and to avoid a political rupture with the United States, increased military forces and capabilities are needed from the major European Allies, particularly Germany. For Germany, spending 2 percent of its large GDP on defense represents a significant jump, a politically difficult decision to make given the German population's deeply-engrained resistance to defense spending and having a large military force. In view of NATO's gap in capabilities, and even at the improved spending rates we see now by many Allies, it is not certain that NATO will be able to deliver the forces and capabilities it needs to balance out the burden of defending Europe. President Trump will surely have something to say about this at the NATO Brussels Summit.

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As a reminder, collective defense is the commitment of NATO members to come to the defense of an Ally who is attacked, in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. That commitment remains firm and binding. NATO will deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security of individual member states or the Alliance as a whole.

For NATO to meet the commitment to “deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges,” NATO must have the ability to generate forces with a range of capabilities and deploy and sustain them wherever they need to go. As a defensive Alliance, in the first instance NATO needs the ability to deter an aggressor. To deter, the

adversary must see credibility in NATO's intent and capability to defend an ally under attack, and all at great cost to the attacker.

If deterrence breaks down and an aggressor attacks a member state or the Alliance, NATO can invoke Article 5. At this point, an adversary can determine whether his gamble will pay off or not — the aggressor will test whether NATO has the ability to generate forces and deploy them, thereby placing the aggressor at risk, or whether NATO is in fact a paper tiger.

As Russia receded as a threat after 1990, NATO shrank the scope and scale of the force generation and mobility requirements needed to meet NATO's collective defense core task and added two new additional core tasks that fit the post-Cold War security environment: crisis response and cooperative security. With the high-end Soviet threat gone NATO could deter the lesser threats with radically reduced defense spending and force structure.

After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, the defense spending free fall in Europe since 1990 had to be reversed quickly. Allies were required to rapidly acquire the capabilities needed for NATO to generate and deploy the necessary forces. NATO heads of state and government agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit to meet the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2024, over a ten-year period. But the gradual spending increases, combined with the years needed to actually acquire the capabilities NATO needs, make the trajectory toward increased capability a slow one.

Defense spending began ticking upwards toward the 2 percent goal by the end of 2017. At NATO, all Allies also accepted the force goals requested of them by NATO defense planners, which was a first. There remain many gaps, especially in readiness, and German participation is still being debated. The German military is a highly professional and capable force that has accomplished many important missions since 1990 — even while spending was being reduced. However, their operational successes unaccompanied by increases in their budgets have come at a cost in maintenance and readiness. Therefore, despite new money coming into the German military, increased

German military capability may not be felt for years as they deal with the backlog of deferred maintenance and modernization requirements. What is the outlook for NATO's ability to generate and deploy forces by 2021?

Three 2021 Scenarios: Best, Worst, Muddle Through

The prospects for continued increases in Allied spending this year and beyond in order to acquire those forces and capabilities can go in three possible directions. There are three rough scenarios for this: best, worst, and muddling through.

Muddling Through: A Bit more Spending, but Not 2 Percent. This middle-of-the road scenario is the most likely, as it is more or less status quo moving forward for the next three years. This would entail the Allies continuing to work toward the 2 percent goal while holding fast to no further declines but falling short of the 2 percent mark — especially the capability engines of Germany and France. Though all Allies have reaffirmed their spending commitments, many Allies see 2 percent of GDP on defense as being beyond their reach both politically and financially. At the end of 2017, 25 Allies were under the 2 percent of GDP target. That number looks likely to grow by the end of 2018.

Such a scenario will in fact cause increased tensions with the United States, as well as weakening Alliance credibility (and so its ability to deter). Territorial defense would continue to fall on the shoulders of the United States at a time when U.S. forces are stretched and when the U.S. president feels committed to defend only those who “pay their bills.”

Positive Scenario: Clear and Credible Positive Momentum. In this positive 2021 scenario all European allies are making serious progress increasing spending, led by the U.K., Germany, and France. Even the EU is getting good marks for doing their bit to improve European military capability, and appears to be soon able to help Europe carry a greater burden. Transatlantic discussions are centered on how to use this enhanced EU military capability for NATO.

The impact of Brexit on U.K. defense spending, as well as the political fragility of increased defense spending in French and German politics means progress is not assured in the years to come. EU efforts have only just started to pick up speed, and while helpful are acknowledged to be focused on marginal military capabilities (such as medical) and with a scope and scale much smaller than what NATO will need.

Negative Scenario: Uneven Spending and Division.

In this scenario most West European countries fall short on meeting the 2 percent goal. Prominently, the U.K., and France fail to show they can even hold their spending at 2 percent, while Germany falls well below the 2 percent mark. Meanwhile, Central European and Baltic countries have established a serious program to increase their spending and improve their capabilities and the generation of military forces. As a result disagreement happens not only between Washington and Europe, but between European Allies in the east and west, and Allies new and old. German and French leadership in Europe is seriously damaged due to their lower level of defense spending. It does not allow for a real increase in forces to the level Eastern Allies feel they should meet. Allies closer to the Eastern Flank see their western partners as not supporting them in their hour of need. The older Allies — particularly France and Germany — are severely criticized by the United States and Eastern Allies not only for their lackluster defense spending but also for a perceived conciliatory approach to Russia. As a result, serious fracturing in Europe is evident in 2021 — just what Putin had in mind.

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How to Avoid the Worst Case Scenario, and How to Achieve the Best Case

The future of increased defense spending will probably be some middle scenario, which will include a number of the elements in the muddling through option. One thing is clear: the critical players are the

U.K., France, and Germany, both in the amount of military capability NATO could acquire as a result of their increased defense spending and especially their leadership among the other Allies to meet the 2 percent. Among the critical players, Germany is the key variable and plays an outsized role. Unfortunately, Germany is the ally where increased defense spending is the most politically controversial, as well as being the key ally most in need of sizable investments toward strengthening their very capable and professional military force. Aside from the United States, NATO's ability to generate and deploy large numbers of capable forces lies largely with Germany.

So how can the needle be moved in Berlin toward consistent and dependable increases in defense spending that will reach the 2 percent spending goal and give the Bundeswehr a more central role in deterrence? In this task, Germany has an important partner in France. Franco-German cooperation both in urging European Allies to spend more on defense and in developing Franco-German defense initiatives, such as a new fifth generation combat aircraft, will be critical not just in getting Europe to do more but Germany as well.

Interestingly, the French strategic culture can impact how much France does conventionally to shore up deterrence in Europe. There remains in some quarters in France an over-reliance on its nuclear capability for deterrence — at the price of keeping at hand a stronger conventional capability. There is also a school of thought in Paris that Russia is not the problem; that it would be better not to provoke the bear and instead make terrorism the French priority, not NATO's northwest flank. However, while these views can play a part in limiting defense spending, they are not the majority. These views will likely not impact Macron's thinking as seen by his quest for greater EU military capability, and efforts such as the European Intervention Initiative. Macron's recent decision to increase defense spending is welcomed and should encourage others to do the same.

But even with close cooperation between Berlin and Paris, Germany has work to do domestically to educate its people on the importance of defense and Germany's leadership role in the defense of Europe.

Germans will only support increases in defense spending and a larger German defense establishment once they understand how deterrence undergirded by the German military keeps the peace that they enjoy today. In Germany, the “end of history” thinking is still very much present. Defense and military subjects featuring the use of force are not part of many university curricula and such topics are not often found as agenda items in many German think tanks. A more aggressive Putin has not propelled Berlin to begin a project to help Germans relearn defense. Berlin is in no hurry to do this, as there are differing views in German ministries about the Russian threat. Some ministers are not so convinced of Putin's aggressive nature and so want to avoid provoking him. Germany has a proclivity toward the rule of law over military action anyway and so would consider military options only after exhausting every legal approach. So the hill is a steep one to climb toward building a constituency in Germany that would support a German military that could add substantially more to NATO's ability to generate and deploy forces to meet the threat NATO sees today.

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So what will move the needle in Berlin on defense spending? First, it must be said the needle has moved some. Defense spending is going up and important procurements are being made. German troops have won high praise for how well they lead the NATO Battlegroup in Lithuania. So the needle moves, but slowly and greater defense spending must compete with other German political issues. Make no mistake, it will remain a struggle to maintain what progress in defense has already been achieved.

But this will likely be Angela Merkel's last term as chancellor. Therefore, she has nothing to lose by taking on this politically delicate issue of helping Germans relearn defense. The first thing that needs to be clear is that increased defense spending is important for Germany and for NATO, it is not a gift to Donald Trump. Increasing German defense spending and

the capability of German forces is an action Germany must take for itself and for NATO. It is important to take away any excuse for not increasing spending, such as the false notion that increasing spending would be an act of submission to the U.S. president.

The chancellor's communication will be critical. Merkel could use the NATO Brussels Summit as an opportunity to explain to Germans why defense is important and the critical role Germany plays. She could stress that the Allies including France are asking Germany to be stronger militarily. It would be helpful if her government, despite differences over the nature of the Russian threat, developed a plan that suggests reintroducing strategic thinking on defense into German academia and into the public discourse, to use education to help change the German strategic culture to better understand deterrence, defense, and the use of force.

NATO's first core task — its *raison d'être* — is to “deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges.”¹ To do this it must demonstrate to its adversaries that it can generate forces and deploy them. Since Russia went on its aggressive path in Georgia and Ukraine, NATO has scrambled to shore up its ability to deter.

But the road to improving deterrence is long and the requirements from Allies are many and will call for more spending. Germany, along with France and the U.K., must help lead the Allies to provide the capabilities needed — and quickly. Germany is the lynchpin in this effort, and Angela Merkel has an opportunity to help change strategic culture in Germany before she leaves office.

At the end of the day, politicians from all 29 Allied nations have a tall task ahead politically and financially to make the case at home that “the end of history” is over and that we must once more reinforce the walls of deterrence. Over the next two years it will become clear exactly how Brexit will impact collective defense, Chancellor Merkel's influence over her new government's defense policy will become clear, and

Macron will demonstrate whether he can sustain increased defense spending. These steps forward will take in the first instance courageous politicians, if we can find them. In Berlin, Paris, and London, political leadership is the issue, not the willingness of their soldiers to fight. But at the end of the day, increased European defense spending and stronger European militaries are required because the European Allies need to strengthen themselves as the Alliance strengthens, not as a sop to President Trump.

1 NATO, “Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation,” Adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, 2010.

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Organized by GMF's Paris office, and inaugurated in Paris on July 19-20, 2012, the GMF Transatlantic Security Task Force (TSTF) brings together, three times a year, a group of 25 high-level American and European security experts, strategic thinkers, government and private sector representatives, mostly of the defense industry, to explore the security priorities for transatlantic cooperation in the years to come and serve as a forum to stimulate and organize a much-needed transatlantic security dialogue on looming threats and possibilities of cooperation.

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