

Is the old NATO dead?

When President Donald Trump travels to Poland in July to meet with its embattled president Andrzej Duda, the two will have a lot to talk about. Both are alternately ridiculed and pilloried in the international press and both are intensely disliked at European Union headquarters in Brussels. Both have been labeled nationalists, demagogues and even dictators-in-the-making. And both of them question NATO's capacity to act as an effective defensive force.

Since taking office in 2015, Duda has consistently pushed for a stronger NATO presence in Poland. He used his first major English-language interview as president to push for Poland to replace Germany as "the real eastern flank of the alliance," and his government has put real money on the table toward that end. Poland is one of only five NATO members to meet its 2 percent of GDP military spending commitment.

By comparison, Germany spends 1.19 percent of its GDP on defense, sixteenth among the twenty-nine NATO members. Poland also meets the less well-known NATO target that at least 20 percent of defense spending should be on equipment, with 25.8 percent of its budget going to procurement. Germany, by contrast, spends only 13.7 percent of its defense budget on equipment, with the result that some German units are armed with broomsticks instead of guns.

What a change a century makes. Until its virtual dismantling in the 1990s, the German Bundeswehr was NATO's main fighting force. While France cowered safely behind a line of American bases in the United Kingdom, West Germany and Italy, the Bundeswehr contributed the majority of NATO's frontline troops, tanks and airplanes. In the darkest days of the Cold War, West Germany was the bulwark of European defense.

No longer. With Germany now lacking the capacity to mount any serious military operation—and no other European country ready to step into the

breach—NATO’s vaunted Article 5 commitment to collective defense has become, in effect, a unilateral U.S. security guarantee. Trump has now publicly accepted the mantle of that responsibility. But that doesn’t change the fact that “all for one and one for all” only makes sense if all have the capacity to help the one.

It is becoming clearer by the day that most Europeans now understand Article 5 as a one-way American commitment to their security. It is true that NATO stood by the United States on September 11, with some NATO countries (the UK in particular) making serious commitments and suffering serious casualties in Afghanistan. But the military budgets of America’s NATO allies declined precipitously between 2008–15. Only a few are now able to defend themselves, never mind come to the aid of others.

In Europe, Poland is now NATO’s central front, and the Polish government is aching for a more permanent NATO (read: American) presence in the country. The simple fact is that Poland is now the bulwark of Europe. It needs American help to hold the line. And given its deep involvement in Ukrainian affairs, Poland is likely to be ever more useful to the United States as an outpost at the heart of Eastern Europe.

Neither Trump nor Duda is likely to be impressed by European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker’s call for a European defense capability to match those of the United States, China and Russia. Speaking in English at a European security conference in Prague, Juncker proposed what has been called a “defense spending spree” of 90 million euros over three years. That’s equivalent to just \$100 million, or about the cost of a single F-35 fighter. Over three years.

Ironically, European leaders bristled last month in Brussels when Trump publicly and privately berated them for not spending enough on defense. Now, despite their overwhelmingly negative response to Trump’s demands, they are calling for more European spending on defense. But “calling for” and “doing” are two different things. European leaders specialize in calling for. America is better known for doing.

Thus, is it no surprise that Poland and the three small Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are much more intent on pinning the United States down on its Article 5 commitment than they are on roping the likes

of Juncker, Germany's Angela Merkel, and new French president Emmanuel Macron into defending Eastern Europe.

Duda might very well get his commitment in July at the Three Seas Initiative summit in Warsaw, where Trump is due to make a major speech. And Trump may come home with some major defense procurement deals in exchange. Expect the possible Polish purchase of American fighter aircraft to be at the top of the agenda for Trump's talks with Duda.

But if all Article 5 really means is a U.S. commitment to defend Eastern Europe, what's NATO got to do with it? With Europe's eastern borders secured by U.S. commitments, where are the threats that Merkel, Juncker and Macron want to defend against? With Poland and the Baltics secured by American guarantees, there is little for any new European defense force to do other than act as a call center channeling requests for U.S. assistance.

In the twentieth century, NATO served its purpose admirably. The twenty-first century may feature the same old challengers, but the challenges have changed. Germany is no longer the fault line of Europe. Ukraine is the new fault line, and Ukraine is unlikely to gain NATO membership anytime soon. Perhaps it is time to drop the facade of European collective defense and let NATO glide gracefully into its future as a feel-good talking shop. In the future, European regional security might look more like Asia's hub-and-spokes system.

In Asia, formal U.S. allies like Japan and Korea, informal allies like Taiwan and Singapore, and even non-allies like India and Vietnam are all much more highly motivated to maintain their own defensive capabilities than are America's NATO allies in Europe. As European nervousness over Trump demonstrates, the United States is more than ever the hub of the European regional security system. Perhaps it's time for the United States to find some new spokes?

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