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Washington: Declare Success and Lead

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NATO faces its most consequential internal test in decades. President Trump has insisted that European members must do more if the Alliance is to remain an American priority. Some allies have responded with fear and loathing as they interpret his intentions and guess what steps Washington will take next. Their expectations range from the ending of America's extended nuclear deterrent "umbrella" for allies, to U.S. withdrawal from the Alliance. Some of this speculation clearly is meant for shock value, but there understandably is renewed discussion in Europe of a European Defense Community outside of NATO, including some form of a "Europeanized" nuclear deterrent. These are not new ideas, but they are once again taken seriously. Some allies seem enthusiastic about a new model of European security; others are much more skeptical.

Before much energy and emotion is invested in speculation about a post-NATO form of security, it is reasonable to coolly consider U.S. intentions and goals. For all the uncertainty and fear in Europe, the general contours of Washington's intentions and goals are not mysterious, unreasonable, or unprecedented.

President Trump clearly believes that European NATO countries and Canada must spend more on defense and, as a consequence, provide more defensive capabilities for the Alliance. This is not a controversial view; it now appears to be shared throughout the Alliance. The remaining questions are: how much more spending, and over what timeframe? Is the responsible spending threshold at least two percent of GDP, as agreed by the Alliance in the



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far more benign threat context of 2006, or is it now five percent? Given contemporary threat conditions, closer to five percent is more reasonable than two: NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has said that, “considerably more than three percent” is needed.¹ But it is important to note that while most NATO members are now increasing their defense spending to over two percent of GDP, some wealthy allies still remain well below even that minimalist threshold, including Spain, Canada, Belgium, Italy and Portugal.²

Such lethargic, nonchalant defense spending may have been reasonable immediately after the Cold War when the general expectation in Europe and Washington was of an emerging “new world order” without great power war. Russia and China supposedly had abandoned revanchist, aggressive goals in favor of economic integration with the West. The United States and allies were quick to recoup a “peace dividend” in this easy context.

The past 15 years have shown, however, that the earlier expectation of an amicable “new world order” was hopelessly naïve. Russia’s horrendous 2022 invasion of Ukraine and related nuclear threats have simply confirmed, even for the most oblivious observers, contemporary harsh threat realities. Nevertheless, the United States and allies have been reluctant to give up their “holiday from history.”³ As a consequence, very real threats now confront the liberal democracies in Asia and Europe, including nuclear threats and a steadily deteriorating balance of power.

This inconvenient threat reality has created the basic dilemma for NATO. When it is clear that great power war is not a thing of the past, the United States is compelled to consider the cost and risk of protecting those wealthy allies that choose to remain indolent. Washington cannot care more about lethargic allies’ security than they do. This “bottom line” is true regardless of who is in the White House.

Allies that remain negligent in their defense efforts run the two-fold risk of encouraging the aggression of expansionist, autocratic powers while discouraging U.S. willingness to prioritize their security. The North Atlantic Treaty allows each member to determine the scope and timing of its response to an attack against NATO. It does not oblige Washington to extend nuclear deterrence or intervene militarily regardless of an ally’s negligence.⁴ Washington could send blankets and night vision goggles, and say “we wish you well,” or massive fighting forces. Both options are consistent with the Treaty. If allies want to be assured of their security through NATO’s collective defense and American power, they must step up to help repair the West’s fading power position. They must contribute seriously to restoring a Western power balance that helps make U.S. “ironclad” commitments credible. That is a reasonable “transatlantic bargain” fully consistent with Treaty obligations. In the absence of a restored balance of power, with greatly increased European conventional forces, “ironclad” commitments must be suspect.

Fortunately, along with Washington, key allies now appear to be recovering from the post-Cold War “holiday from history” and ready to support a Western power position that deters war and makes U.S. security guarantees reasonable and credible. Even Germany, until recently a wealthy defense shirker, has now passed legislation facilitating a large increase in military spending.⁵ Allies that refuse to do so must live with the risks they have chosen to run. The



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allies' options are clear: continue working with the United States in an increasingly dangerous environment or move in a separate direction. The latter option would entail far greater expense and risk. Mark Rutte has rightly said that, given the unprecedented contemporary global security challenges, "this is not the time to go it alone."⁶

As allies become more responsible, Washington needs to clarify that it will not withdraw from NATO, fold the nuclear umbrella, stand idly by if responsible allies are attacked, surrender the position of Supreme Allied Commander, or permit Ukraine to be overrun. Such steps would give Putin what Moscow has been denied for over six decades, the collapse of NATO. That the United States will not take these steps is a truth that needs to be expressed, along with the sharp criticism and ostracization of allies that remain indolent and a collective burden. President Trump should, at this point, declare success. His tone and language have finally accomplished what past Presidents have unsuccessfully sought—for allies to increase their defense efforts to strengthen the deterrence of war. It has taken a Russian invasion and Washington's disruptive language to get to this point. President Trump should recognize his success and, correspondingly, make obvious that Washington will continue to meet the demands of leadership.

In conclusion, NATO's model of the past three decades is neither sustainable nor credible. NATO must adapt to new threat realities in a way that is sustainable and provides credible deterrence. This means that Washington must resist the vapid temptation to withdraw from leading the Alliance, on the condition that European allies step up seriously to the contemporary demands of collective security. They can no longer indulge in the luxury of lethargic defense preparations based on the illusion that there is no threat or on the presumption that America will automatically storm the beaches and roll back the aggressor for them. Such oblivious indulgence provides a tempting target for Moscow's strategy of achieving a military fait accompli accompanied by coercive nuclear threats, with support from China, North Korea and Iran. Instead, a workable model for NATO must provide a credible deterrent to Russian aggression. It demands U.S. leadership, and that allies sacrifice much more for the defense of Europe than they have for decades. With these two pillars in place, Putin will be frustrated, but Europe and America will be safer.

¹ Quoted in Ivo Daalder, "NATO Without America," *Foreign Affairs*, March 28, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/nato-without-america>.

² See NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, June 17, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm.

³ As labeled by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates in, "We face unprecedented peril," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2024, available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=We+face+unprecedented+peril.+The+Pentagon+and+Congress+must+change+their+ways.&oq>.

⁴ As is suggested in, Daalder, "NATO Without America," op. cit.



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⁵ See Ines Trindade Pereira, “How much do NATO members spend on defence as threat perceptions rise?” *Euronews*, March 28, 2025, available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/28/how-much-do-nato-members-spend-on-defence-as-threat-perceptions-rise>.

⁶ Quoted in, Barbara Erling and Liti Bayer, “‘This is not the time to go it alone,’ NATO’s Rutte tells US and Europe,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/this-is-not-time-go-it-alone-natos-rutte-tells-us-europe-2025-03-26/>.

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