

Is Trump Right About Europe?

By

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Former President Donald Trump's views on Europe are consistent. He has long criticized North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-states for their failure to spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. For Trump, free riding is anathema. He recently said [he would encourage Russia](#) to do "whatever the hell they want" to any NATO member country that does not meet spending guidelines on defense. As the former president put it, "NATO was busted until I came along." He added, "I said, 'Everybody's gonna pay.' They said, 'Well, if we don't pay, are you still going to protect us?' I said, 'Absolutely not.' They couldn't believe the answer."

In Washington policy and political circles, the former President's comments are met with both shock and disdain. The familiar tropes about the indispensability of the Western alliance and the civilizational connection with Europe are trotted out to defend NATO. In the Pentagon, there is even an optimistic belief that Europe is the security partner of future expeditionary missions around the world.

While Trump may talk like a shock jock, what he says about NATO and Europe hold true. Unless some tough love is imposed on the Europeans, American taxpayers will foot Europe's security bill indefinitely. What Europe needs to understand is that America is changing, and with it Europe's free pass is getting rescinded.

The Demographic Transition

One reason the Trans-Atlantic political and military alliance will change is the demographic transition in both the United States and Europe. In the US, by about 2045, citizens not of European extraction become a slim majority. Surveys of the next generation show that the affinity for Europe and with traditional American foreign policy imperatives is shrinking. The younger generation's position on the Palestine-Israel conflict is a case in point. Latinos, Asians, and black Americans do not have emotional ties to Europe. They are, therefore, less inclined to tolerate and support the subsidizing of European defense efforts.

Instead, much like Trump, they will call on Europe to pay its bills. Europe, however, cannot pay those bills since it is an aging society with a large welfare state. As **Table 1** shows, major European societies are rapidly aging. Not only that, but their median age is also going to rise to the extent that they will have a hard time fielding women and men of a fighting age.

Table 1

Country	Population 2020 (millions)	Population 2030 (millions)	Population 2050 (millions)	Median Age 2020	Median Age 2030	Median Age 2050
United Kingdom	67.8	70.4	74.08	40.5	42.4	44.5
France	65.2	66.6	67.5	42.3	44.1	45.9
Germany	83.7	83.1	80.1	45.7	47	49.2
Greece	10.4	9.9	9.02	45.6	49.8	53.4
Italy	60.4	59.03	54.3	47.3	50.8	53.6
Portugal	10.2	9.91	9.08	46.2	49.8	52.2
Spain	46.7	46.2	43.6	44.9	49.6	53.3
Sweden	10.09	10.6	11.3	41.1	42.2	43.8
Turkey	84.3	89.1	97.1	31.6	35	41.7

Source: Data retrieved from UN Population Revision 2019. (These numbers do not account for the recent population transfer from Ukraine to Russia or to the millions of Ukrainian refugees now in other parts of Europe who are unlikely to return.)

These numbers paint a bleak future. The nations listed above have the largest and most capable armed forces among NATO. In short, they all have greying populations and, by 2030, except for Turkey, will have a median age that is greater than 40. Italy, for example, is in serious demographic trouble with a median age of 50.8. Spain and Greece also have a median age of nearly 50. Worse, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain are all going to see a major decline in their populations. The priority of these countries is focused on meeting the social needs of their populations—something which is very expensive and can only come at the cost of reduced defense expenditure.

The other big problem for the Europeans is finding people who are willing to join the armed forces. After the Cold War, most European countries eliminated conscription. Reintroducing it would be political suicide for even the most conservative politician. Thus, while German Prime Minister Olof Schulz has committed 100 billion euros to defense modernization, he cannot realistically bring about force expansion without bringing back conscription. Further, 100 billion euros are not primarily going to buy more weapons but, instead, refurbish and modernize the existing force, much of which is mothballed.

The fact that the European nations lack manpower and the fact that rebuilding the forces will be expensive leads to the modest size of the militaries of the major NATO countries (as shown in Table 2). The question then arises, how many troops and weapons can these nations realistically field in modern combat? The answer is very few as these countries are likely to be casualty averse given their shrinking and aging demographics.

Table 2: Cuts in Force Levels of Major European Nations

Country	Army 1972	Army 2017	Army 2023	Aircraft 1972	Aircraft 2017	Aircraft 2023
United Kingdom	180,458	85,600	79,350	500	254	201
France	328,000	111,650	114,000	500	281	261
Germany	327,000	111,650	62,950	459	235	226
Italy	306,000	102,200	93,100	320	244	231

Source: *The Military Balance* [IISS: London], 1972, 2017, and 2023 editions.

The Two Percent Myth

The other myth that Europe must stop hyping is that of how these countries are going to reach 2 percent of GDP in their defense spending. A remilitarization of Europe would require the Germans to cross the 2 percent threshold, but, by the end of 2022, the German government was admitting that it is unlikely to raise defense expenditure to 2 percent of GDP.

Table 3: NATO Defense Expenditure as a Percentage of GDP, 2023

Country	Percentage of GDP Spent on Defense
France	1.9
Germany	1.54
Greece	3.01
Italy	1.46
Netherlands	1.7
Spain	1.26
Turkey	1.31
United Kingdom	2.29
United States	3.52

Source: *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (2014–2023), *NATO Communique*, July 7, 2023.

The news is not all bad. Those NATO member-states who most fear Russia, or, in the cases of Greece and Turkey, are spending the required 2 percent of GDP on defense. However, except for the United Kingdom, the further geographically from Russia a NATO member-state gets, the less the country spends on defense.

Table 4: NATO Nations Spending Two Percent of GDP on Defense

Country	Percentage of GDP on Defense 2022	Estimated Percentage of GDP 2023
Estonia	2.28	2.73
Greece	3.82	3.01
Latvia	2.27	2.07
Lithuania	2.03	2.54
Poland	2.1	3.9
Romania	2.02	2.44
United Kingdom	2.29	2.07

United States	3.52	3.49
Finland (new member 2023)	n/a	2.45

Source: *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023)*, *NATO Communique*, July 7, 2023.

With only a third of NATO member-states contributing 2 percent of GDP, it begs the question to what end? Estonia, for example, has a population is 1.3 million. Is 2 percent of Estonia's small GDP a meaningful contribution to the Continent's collective defense? Latvia, similarly, has 1.9 million citizens. Lithuania has 2.79 million citizens. In practical terms, this means that for credible militarization the rich and populous states of Europe need to reach a similar level of defense expenditures.

Most NATO nations intend to raise their defense expenditure to 2 percent by 2026. Italy and Spain expect to reach it by 2028 and 2029, respectively. This is, however, a medium-term projection which does not consider the state of the economy. Neither does it explain where funding will come from. The social democracies of Europe are unlikely to agree to a transfer of resources from social welfare programs to defense expenditures. In fact, with rapidly aging populations the cost of elderly care will grow.

The other alternative, raising taxes, is unpopular in European societies, which already carry a heavy individual tax burden. Further, in some countries, notably Britain, the prevailing mood is to cut taxes, making it unfeasible to ask the citizenry to agree to a tax increase to fund defense expenditures. The question arises, therefore, where will the money come from to pay for new weapons, the development of a defense infrastructure, and the intake of more troops to boost larger military formations?

A European Nuclear Deterrent

One way out is for Europe to field a Euro-centric nuclear umbrella. Talk is already ongoing as some suggest the French nuclear force transform into one requiring joint authority to permit employment. The British nuclear force, since 1962, has been committed to the protection of NATO members.

One way to achieve this integration painlessly would be to state which missions fell under the purview of the French or British nuclear authority and which would be covered by the joint command. Thus, a French decision to use a tactical nuclear weapon in response to a 9/11-style terror attack, for example, would be the country's sovereign right while a Russian assault would fall under the category of a jointly authorized strike. NATO member states would contribute to the cost of maintaining and fielding the force—perhaps increasing its size and capability.

One can also speculate on whether other NATO states may decide to cross the nuclear Rubicon given the changed security environment on the continent. Sweden and Poland would certainly fall into this category given their fears of Russian expansionism. If this happens, it is well within the scope of nonproliferation laws since countries are allowed to leave the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty if their core security interests are threatened (The problem for the US, however, is how to prevent non-Western states from taking a similar step).

While this may compensate for the inability to field adequate forces it would certainly meet with considerable opposition from the peace groups in Europe and the general population which is wary of nuclearization. Which then brings the issue back to the need for conventional militarization.

Fielding capable militaries that can defend Europe and project power in alliance with the United States requires NATO member-states to make hard choices about spending and compulsory military service. For the reasons cited above that is unlikely. For the United States, therefore, the best course of action is to redefine its commitment to Europe and let the continent make the diplomatic and political compromises needed to bring about regional stability.

For those in the Pentagon who think Europe is a partner to help maintain global security, it is time to look for new security alliances. The evidence is clear. Europe has neither the funds nor the manpower to be a partner of the United States.

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