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THE SECOND BERLIN WALL

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The latest contretemps in NATO regarding burden sharing in Afghanistan has the distinguishing feature of being altogether pedestrian. European reluctance to contribute more troops and funding to Afghanistan has less to do with disagreements over strategy than it does with a pattern of behavior stemming back to the birth of the Alliance.

Few recall the contentious deliberations at the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and its European allies regarding military contributions to the Alliance. The Truman administration expected the European powers to reconstitute their armies once they had recovered economically. But, having little faith in the American security guarantee, European statesmen refused to raise sufficient forces for defense without a tangible commitment from the United States. With no movement on the matter, the United States relented, deploying several divisions to NATO in 1949. Yet, the European reciprocal pledge did not materialize.

With security assured through collective defense and the U.S. nuclear umbrella, European states progressively invested in social welfare programs that demanded a greater portion of gross domestic products (GDP). And social welfare states are voraciously self-indulgent. During this transformation, an interesting pattern of behavior manifested. Rather than share collective defense equitably, member states attempted to shift security burdens subtly to other members. Other than voicing annoyance, the United States, as a global superpower in a bipolar world, accepted this behavior because the larger goal of peace in Europe remained intact.

Even had the United States objected to this sort of behavior, what could be done? Every state west of the Iron Curtain, whether a member of NATO or not, enjoyed the collective good of security. The United States certainly could not have denied this security to any particular state. Hence, allied compliance with U.S. security policy initiatives alternated between acceptance of America's leadership role and American use of bargaining (e.g., financial and prestigious incentives). Ultimately, it was easier to ignore the behavior.

The end of the Cold War held different meanings for both sides of the Atlantic. For the Europeans, it meant a peace dividend with the inexorable drop in military expenditures, falling well below 2 percent of GDP. Perhaps this laxness would not have evolved had the United States withdrawn from NATO as most Realists predicted.

However, the United States, ever fearful of a security dilemma emerging again in Europe, sought to keep a united Germany subordinated to NATO, while also using the prospect of NATO membership to moderate the behavior of Central and East European states. With both policy vectors, the United States was eminently successful, but then, reacting to questions of NATO's continued relevance, the Alliance added collective security missions to its repertoire. Whether the Europeans understood the implications of collective security or simply went along, never believing in its implementation, is anyone's guess.

With the extension of the U.S. security commitment to Europe affirmed, along with the rise of the European Union (EU) in 1993, there arose among European statesmen a nontraditional view of foreign and security policy. The centerpiece of this new policy would rest on international institutions, regimes, and other normative devices to undergird security and stability. In theory, this approach obviated the need for high military readiness, which declined precipitously, and permitted even greater budgetary allocations toward social welfare programs, much to the satisfaction of everyone—except for the United States.

Much to the chagrin of western European statesmen, Hobbes' state of nature threw cold water on the soft power approach in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, requiring American intervention (under the aegis of NATO) to resolve the conflicts. In response and with great fanfare, European governments pledged to improve military capabilities, first with the Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI) and the Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC), and, second, by the creation of the EU Rapid Reaction Force (EURRF) under the EU Headline Goal. Regrettably, European states did not increase military expenditures to meet the DCI/PCC goals, at least not with any type of urgency. Contrary to initial lofty pronouncements, the EURRF has not evolved into a European security pillar. Its offspring, the EU Battle Groups (EUBG), suffer from an inability to handle large crises and also from a lack of political will to deploy contingents into dangerous environments. Hence, the European security pillar is little more than a peacekeeping force with paltry combat capabilities.

The dichotomy between European rhetoric and action regarding Afghanistan is certainly perplexing. In the wake of 9/11, NATO did provide some assets to Operation Enduring Freedom under Article V; the coalition in Afghanistan includes many non-NATO nations; and all participating governments agree with the overarching goals for Afghanistan. Yet, the majority of European governments consistently fail to deliver on their financial and military pledges, many of which date back to 2003. A plausible explanation may be that European statesmen are prisoners of their political systems.

Fundamentally, European affinity for extravagant social welfare programs, the obsession with cutting military spending, and a distinct predilection for peacekeeping operations are manifestations of European political institutions. Because of their pluralistic design, parliamentary governments tend to be unduly influenced by the mercurial passions of the electorate. Moreover, coalition governments, that is, governments which lack a legislative majority and must form a government with other political parties, often experience paralysis over contentious issues and can even fall as a result.

The security challenges in Afghanistan have become divisive among coalition states precisely because they expose the old practice of burden shifting and because the United States uncharacteristically has not backed off its insistence for greater military contributions. Transatlantic tensions will very likely become intractable. On the one hand, the old European standbys of claiming overtaxed militaries and implying other allies are not fulfilling their obligations have become threadbare with the United States. But on the other hand, populist attitudes that increased military spending to meet new challenges will threaten cherished social welfare programs appear to have boxed in European governments. The pawns of these national policies are the armed forces, which are deployed into theater as a coalition or Alliance balm and not as a force to render decisive results. Small troop contingents combined with a plethora of national caveats tend to undercut the theoretical advantages of multilateralism. In Afghanistan's case, the sum appears to be smaller than the whole.

The real issue at stake is not whether success or failure in Afghanistan will endanger the Alliance; rather it is whether the United States will continue to see utility in NATO's integrated military structure. NATO as an institution will remain because the United States sees utility in its continuance. However, in the future, the United States will likely revert to bilateral negotiations to build coalitions because of the niggard behavior of too many NATO members. Similar to the first Berlin Wall, today's metaphorical Berlin Wall symbolizes the enslavement of statesmen to the social welfare state and weak political systems. And while future generations will look back and ask why Europe slept when a challenge grew into a threat, this should be the starting point.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This colloquium brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

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