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# NATO, Brexit, and America's Security

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This summer the United Kingdom held a referendum on whether the British should leave the European Union. Those advocating Brexit won by almost four points, sending shock waves throughout the European Union, along with predictions of dire consequences for the British and the union's possible dissolution. Around the same time, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump roused a shorter-lived squall of criticism for comments questioning America's participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While very different in their nature and effects, both events raised questions about what an unraveling of these two multinational organizations could mean for America's security.

Trump's campaign rhetoric about US participation in NATO is less consequential than the intensity of the criticism of it suggests. His claims that our contributions to NATO are "costing us a fortune" and that the Europeans are "getting a free ride" are exaggerated and more simplistic versions of a long tradition of voicing similar frustrations with the Europeans' chronic refusal to meet their funding obligations, especially for the voluntary contributions that pay for NATO operations.<sup>1</sup> In 1970, Montana Democratic senator Mike Mansfield wrote a column calling for the "Europeanization" of NATO to reduce the 300,000 American service members stationed in Europe.<sup>2</sup> His aim was to cut back on some of the then \$14 billion a year spent on Europe's defense. More recently, the continuing failure of NATO members to meet their fiscal obligations—codified in the NATO treaty's Article Three, which directs member states to "maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack"—in 2006 led the Riga Summit to require that each state spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defense. As of 2015, only five of the twenty-eight NATO countries are meeting that requirement, a group that does not include the first, third, fourth, and fifth largest economies in the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

We should not be surprised, then, that criticism of European defense parsimony is common. In 2011, then defense secretary Robert M. Gates subtly threatened NATO members for their failure to carry their weight. "The blunt reality," Gates warned, "is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense."<sup>4</sup> Nor is it just skinflint Americans making the complaints. As Carnegie Europe pointed out last year, the number of NATO members has doubled since 1990, but defense spending has gone down 28 percent.<sup>5</sup>



NATO knows this imbalance is a problem. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said last year, “We need to redouble our efforts to reverse this trend. We are facing more challenges, and we cannot do more with less indefinitely.”<sup>6</sup> On its website, NATO confesses that in military operations, “there is an over-reliance by the Alliance as a whole on the United States for the provision of essential capabilities, including for instance, in regard to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; air-to-air refuelling; ballistic missile defence; and airborne electronic warfare,” not to mention other matériel.<sup>7</sup> During the 2011 NATO operation in Libya, for example, of the 246 cruise missiles launched, the United States fired 218.

As for Trump’s undiplomatic suggestion that as president he might not honor Article Five, which states that “an armed attack against one or more of [member states] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all,” his critics put too much faith in the carefully crafted language of the treaty. In the event of such an attack, Article Five continues, “each” member will respond “by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action *as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force*” [emphasis added]. That last clause suggests a whole host of “actions” that would not require the mobilization of a country’s armed forces for actual fighting and dying. And it contains a convenient loophole that leaves the decision of what is “necessary” up to what each country “deems.” This decision would no doubt involve each country’s calculation of its own national interests and the will of its electorate as higher priorities than the fate of its fellow NATO member. No country would be prudent to entrust its fate to a “parchment barrier” like Article Five.

Despite all these problems, however, we are unlikely to see a president seriously try to leave NATO. And the Europeans are getting too good a deal to want to leave. There seems to be a consensus in the foreign policy establishment that the United States benefits from NATO’s deterrent effect and the diplomatic cover it provides when America intervenes militarily abroad. And despite Gates’s veiled threat, American voters do not see spending inequities in the alliance as an issue they are passionate about. In a Pew poll taken right after Trump’s comments, 51 percent of Americans did not view NATO favorably, only four points higher than in 2009.<sup>8</sup> This is hardly a mandate for any politician to spend political capital on dismantling a sixty-seven-year-old institution.

England’s departure from the European Union (EU) is a much more serious and portentous event, though no one should have been surprised. Discontent with the EU has been constant since its creation by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. A year before the 2008 financial crisis, German foreign minister Joschka Fischer fretted, “The EU is on autopilot, in stalemate, in deep crisis.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, Eurobarometer public opinion surveys have recorded the same angst among European citizens, only 25 percent of whom in 2014 believed “things are going in the right direction in the European Union.”<sup>10</sup> Such pessimism remains widespread. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, in the very first sentence of his new book, writes, “Europe, the source of the Enlightenment, the birthplace of modern science, is in crisis.”<sup>11</sup>

The causes of this malaise have been repeatedly identified and analyzed. Intrusive regulation of businesses, restrictive hiring and firing laws, overgenerous retirement benefits, high taxes, and lavish social welfare spending have led to sluggish growth in GDP and chronic high unemployment, problems exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis. Generous asylum and immigration policies, at the same time assimilation is made difficult in most European countries, have created a sullen, underemployed class of Muslim immigrants overrepresented both in prisons and on welfare rolls. Even before the 2015 immigration crisis, violence by Muslim young men has been endemic, particularly in France, where setting thousands of cars on fire has become a sport. More seriously, terrorist attacks in London (2005) and Madrid (2004) killed nearly 250 people, presaging last year's bloody attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Nice instigated by ISIS.

Deeper structural problems suggest policy changes may not be able to make the European Union viable. Birthrates are dangerously low, 1.58 births per woman, far below the replacement rate of 2.1, with ominous implications for EU economies.<sup>12</sup> As economist Guillermo de la Dehesa writes, this demographic deficit “could be very severe for the E.U.’s future growth. . . . A graying population means a less active population, less entrepreneurship, less innovation, higher and probably unsustainable public expenditures, all of which result in lower growth.”<sup>13</sup> Lower growth means fewer workers, and fewer workers mean fewer taxes to fund social welfare programs. The Great Recession has worsened these problems, especially unemployment, now averaging 10.1 percent, but twice that for those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.<sup>14</sup>

Equally troublesome is the famous “democracy deficit” that characterizes the European Union. This problem became glaring in 2005, when the Treaty Establishing a Constitution of Europe was rejected by France, the Netherlands, and Ireland in popular referenda. The Treaty of Lisbon that replaced it in 2009 was not put to that democratic test. This “democracy deficit,” moreover, is baked into the governing structures of the EU. Member-state citizens vote directly only for the European Parliament, which cannot initiate legislation. The other three main governing bodies comprise government ministers, heads of state, or appointees from member states. Thus democratic principles of transparency and accountability to citizens are compromised by the very governing structure of the European Union.

In addition, the preponderance of officials appointed from sovereign nations means that despite the ideal of a transnational European government able to transcend parochial nationalist interests and achieve greater unity, those interests will have an outsized influence on the workings of the European Union. And, obviously, the interests of the more powerful states like Germany and France will take precedence. As is seen with NATO, adherence to the rules will frequently be determined by national interests, and policy will often ignore the interests of less powerful states.



The economic and immigration crises have illustrated this structural weakness. Despite Article 125 of the Lisbon Treaty, which categorically forbids financial bailouts of member states, the EU and the International Monetary Fund went ahead and bailed out Greece, which still owes 323 billion euros in sovereign debt. Yet this casual adherence to the rules has long been a habit of EU members. For example, the Stability and Growth Pact of 1998 set limits of 3 percent of GDP for deficits and 60 percent of GDP for debt. Since then all but three countries have violated the 3 percent limit at some point, although since 2008 most EU states have met the requirement. Not so the 60 percent of GDP limit on debt: in 2015 the average debt to GDP ratio in the European Union was 86 percent and in the eurozone 90 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the demonization of nationalism and the goal of limiting nationalist interests that lay behind the creation of the European Union—an ideal belied, of course, by the critical role the EU government gives to politicians from sovereign states—the recent financial crisis has provoked among the masses a return of repressed nationalism and cultural differences. Germany’s dominant role in setting the terms of debt relief for Greece, for example, and the irrelevance of a referendum in which 61 percent of Greeks rejected the bailout package and the austerity strings attached to it, provided another example that some EU nations are more equal than others.

This resurgence of nationalist and populist sentiment cuts against the grain of the European Union’s centralized, supranational technocracy, and has been intensified even more by the immigration crisis of 2015, when a million immigrants, half from war-torn Syria, flooded into EU countries. Germany again has been at the forefront of the response to this crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel took the lead, publicly welcoming immigrants, suspending a 1990 protocol that refugees must seek asylum from the first European country they enter, and insisting that other countries accept immigrants as well.

What seemed a highhanded unilateral policy to other EU nations, and the spate of terrorist attacks and crimes such as last New Year’s Eve mass sexual assaults and rapes in Cologne by Middle Eastern immigrants, have pitted EU nation against nation, brought back border controls and barriers, and empowered nationalist and populist parties across Europe. The policy was a major factor in the success of the Brexit referendum. How strong and durable this electoral shift turns out to be will become clearer in the coming year after national elections and possible further referenda on leaving the EU are conducted by other member states.

Finally, these recent crises have exposed the fundamental weakness of the European Union: the lack of any unifying principle or ideal that can bestow on twenty-eight different cultures, languages, politics, traditions, mores, folkways, religions, and histories a solidarity and loyalty strong enough to make citizens put aside their national interests and subordinate their national identities to a vague “European” one. Without a *unum* to unite the *pluribus*, the EU is unlikely to survive in its current form.

Should this happen, what would be the implications for the security of the United States? If NATO is unlikely to fall apart, then it will continue to be the key military alliance for America and for Europe. Given that NATO existed for forty-four years before the creation of the EU, and survived France's absence for forty-three years, there's no reason to think it will not continue if the European Union should fragment. And even if NATO did dissolve, the United States could quickly negotiate bilateral or multilateral mutual defense pacts with European nations.

As for the EU's defense needs, a breakup of the union may lead countries to strengthen their military capabilities, which would benefit the United States as well. They would then have greater national autonomy and flexibility in crafting a foreign policy more suitable for their individual cultures, politics, and geographical circumstances. Moreover, as Jakub Grygiel argued recently in *Foreign Affairs*, "Only patriotism has the kind of powerful and popular appeal that can mobilize Europe's citizens to rearm against their threatening neighbors. People are far more willing to fight for their country—for their history, their soil, their common religious identity—than they are for an abstract regional body created by fiat."<sup>16</sup> No one is likely to die for the EU flag.

Their national autonomy restored, the countries of Europe could form alliances with other states, including the United States, the terms of which would be more finely calibrated to their particular shared interests and security needs. Or they could create a long-promised multinational EU military. Now that the United Kingdom will leave the EU, the French are pushing to create a "joint European military headquarters and increase cooperation among their armed forces," as the *New York Times* reports.<sup>17</sup> Greater responsibility for their own defense might also motivate the European nations to dedicate more of their national budgets to their militaries. Then they could better finance the "more NATO" that NATO secretary general Stoltenberg has recently called for.<sup>18</sup> Of course, these developments would depend on European citizens being willing to spend the money, an admittedly dubious proposition.

Some argue that such developments would be harmful to American and European military cooperation. But given America's enormous military power and defense spending, and the cultural, economic, and political ties and affinities between European states and the United States, it is likely the former will find the latter the best partner for advancing their interests and providing for their defense. The result will be a world safer for Europe and the United States.

## NOTES

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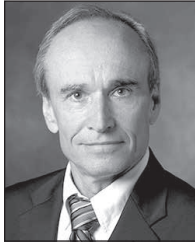
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