

It's High Time for Germany to Fund, and Fix, Its Military



The country is far from NATO's 2% budget guideline, and its defense establishment is rife with dysfunction.

The U.S. ambassador to Germany caused a stir last week by suggesting Washington could withdraw U.S. troops from Germany if Berlin continues to fall below its NATO commitment to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense. "It is actually offensive," Richard Grenell told German media, "to assume that the U.S. taxpayer must continue to pay to have 50,000-plus Americans in Germany, but the Germans get to spend their surplus on domestic programs."

Grenell's frustration is justified. U.S. presidents since Dwight Eisenhower have complained about NATO's European members sitting passively on the sidelines while the United States does most of the heavy lifting for their security. The American people are likewise right to find it patently absurd that a wealthy country like Germany, whose \$3.9 trillion GDP is the largest in Europe, is unwilling to invest in its own national defense. There is simply no excuse, other than domestic politics, for Berlin to continue dragging its heels.

If present trends continue, Germany will remain far below NATO's 2 percent

defense spending benchmark in 2024, despite a decade of promises by German governments to meet this alliance objective. The little Germany has been willing to spend is simply unsustainable, and neither the Trump administration nor any future U.S. administration should accept this state of affairs as the cost of doing business. Settling for the status quo is not fair to the U.S. taxpayer, fair to the alliance as a whole, or wise from the standpoint of Germany's own national security. Berlin should be prepared to keep Germans safe regardless of conditions in Washington.

However, Berlin's problems go beyond budgets. According to the German Parliament's own inspector of Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr is plagued by over-management, excessive bureaucracy, poor staffing, training delays, a lack of deployable weapons, and an undersupply of basic equipment like radios and night-vision goggles. As a high-ranking German military officer told *Politico Europe* earlier this year, "No matter where you look, there's dysfunction."

That dysfunction includes the fact that by late 2018, only 30 percent of Germany's 136 Eurofighter jets could stay in the air. Half of its fleet of transport aircraft were not operational last year. Not one submarine was ready for service. Recruitment for the Bundeswehr has been lackluster; a parliamentary report found that just 20,000 recruits joined the service in 2018, the lowest in history. Just this month, the Germans had to ground all 53 of its Tiger helicopters due to technical malfunctions in the jet's hardware.


The German military is a mess, and that becomes the United States' problem when politicians in Berlin are too politically timid to meet the NATO commitments they have made. Leaders in Washington owe it to the American people to display the backbone their counterparts in Berlin apparently lack.

Indeed, this is why a burden-sharing message from Washington is so important. If the wealthiest European nation is not adequately investing in its own defense, the rest of our NATO partners in Europe will have less incentive to fulfill their own obligations. Their promises will continue to be nothing but meaningless words on a piece of paper.

The question U.S. policymakers must ask is how the United States can make burden-sharing a reality. German lawmakers are unlikely to take seriously

Grenell's threat to redeploy tens of thousands of U.S. service members from Germany to Poland. And even if the threat were made good, moving American troops closer to Russian borders could only compound the problem by confirming a belief prevalent within the German foreign policy establishment: Whether Uncle Sam is in Germany, Poland, or Latvia, he will always be there to protect us.

What the White House should do instead is send a clear, strong, and unambiguous message to Germany that Washington will no longer accept a situation whereby Berlin doesn't sufficiently contribute monetarily and militarily to its own security. If Germany wants to be treated like a valued member of NATO, it should stop using politics as an excuse to avoid making the investments in readiness, acquisition, training, and recruitment and retention it so desperately needs. This means tapping into the considerable wealth at its disposal and giving the Bundeswehr what it requires: functional, modern military platforms and equipment. The United States can't care for Germany's security more than the Germans themselves.

International politics is becoming increasingly characterized by intense great power competition. In such an environment, the United States must prioritize limited resources and avoid overextension on other countries' behalf. Allies like Germany which have the resources to shoulder more of the collective security burden must do so. The status quo is not a realistic alternative. 

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