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Burden Sharing Revisited

How to Keep the United States Engaged in Europe's Security



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The US presidential elections will be a pivotal moment for European security. Donald Trump, if reelected, could decide to drastically cut US military support to Europe. Yet a second Biden administration is also likely to insist on more equitable burden sharing. German and European leaders must use the time remaining until November to influence the US debate: They need to commit to concrete measures now – not only to improve European security but also to incentivize Washington to remain committed to Europe.

- Most importantly, European allies must keep their promise to consistently spend at least two percent of GDP on defense. Germany needs to allay any doubt that it will honor its commitment before the NATO summit in July.
 - To fill capability gaps that could cripple European defense if Washington decided to even partly withdraw, Berlin should propose expanding the use of NATO's Framework Nation Concept.
 - To bolster NATO's eastern flank, Germany and other European allies must work harder to quickly station more soldiers in the Baltic states. They also need to step up support to Ukraine.
 - More support for US strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific could go a long way to winning goodwill in Washington and ensuring a continued US footprint in Europe. European allies should send a clear message to China to deter any aggression against Taiwan.
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A PIVOTAL MOMENT

In the years since the Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” in 2011, China and the Indo-Pacific region have significantly gained in strategic importance for the United States. It has also become clear that Washington’s priority shift potentially comes at the cost of European security.¹

Russia, by waging war on Ukraine, has halted this shift, at least to a certain degree. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and attack on the Donbass in 2014 and its full-fledged assault on Ukraine in February 2022 have so far prevented the United States from significantly reducing its security engagement in Europe. Indeed, the Biden administration has sharply increased US support for European security since February 2022 to help Ukraine’s war effort as well as to shore up the defense of NATO territory.² However, Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has also underscored the ongoing dependency of European NATO allies, including Germany, on the military support provided by the United States.

European leaders should seize what may be their last opportunity to convince the US to remain engaged

Today, Europe is facing a predicament: Despite ample warnings about US plans to scale back on the continent, it has failed to take sufficient steps to ensure its own security. Europe remains reliant on the United States for both nuclear and conventional defense. With the upcoming US presidential election in

November 2024, Europe faces a pivotal moment. As the election campaign heats up, the question whether the United States should reduce its commitment toward Europe will gain increased attention. Up until election day, European leaders can still influence this debate. They should seize what may be their last opportunity to convince the United States to remain engaged with its European allies.

THREE FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

In this situation, European policymakers should bear several fundamental assumptions in mind. Firstly, it is plausible to assume that a majority in both political parties in the United States, while seeking greater reciprocity from European allies, still places some value on US engagement in European security and defence matters.³

Secondly, by meeting demands for a more equitable burden-sharing, Europe can help ensure that Washington maintains at least part of its commitment to European security. If, through Europe’s efforts, the United States can lessen its burden of keeping conventional forces in Europe, it may be more willing to maintain the nuclear umbrella that European NATO allies will likely not be able to supplant in the foreseeable future. The United States could thus remain a reliable partner for the long term.

Thirdly, Europe should look beyond the European theatre. Washington is advocating burden-sharing in the Indo-Pacific, urging partners within and outside the region to contribute more actively to their own security. Addressing these concerns in the Indo-Pacific could earn goodwill in Washington and potentially lead to concessions in Europe.

In brief, Europe must become more active to ensure its own security, not only, but also to incentivize the United States to remain committed to Europe. This is true regardless of who will reside in the White House from 2025 but becomes even more important if Donald Trump should win a second term. During

1 Kathleen McInnis and Daniel Fata, “From Burden Sharing to Responsibility Sharing”, CSIS, June 3, 2023: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/burden-sharing-responsibility-sharing> (accessed February 6, 2024), p. 4.

2 Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, “How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts,” Council on Foreign Relations (December 8, 2023): <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts> (accessed February 13, 2024) and Jim Garamone, “Biden Announces Changes in U.S. Force Posture in Europe,” U.S. Department of Defense News (June 29, 2022): <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3078087/biden-announces-changes-in-us-force-posture-in-europe> (accessed February 13, 2024).

3 Dominik Tolksdorf “Transatlantic Cooperation on Ukraine. How Europe could Respond to Uncertainty over US Assistance,” DGAP Policy Brief 37, German Council on Foreign Relations (December 2023): https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-Policy%20Brief_No-37_December-19_7pp.pdf (accessed February 13, 2024).

his first administration, Washington continued to invest in European defense provisions despite the president's threats to withdraw from NATO.⁴ Yet it is entirely possible that during a second term, Trump might act more uninhibitedly.⁵ A greater European commitment to transatlantic security and defense could help contain such potential behavior and make it more difficult for the United States to justify withdrawing from Europe on the grounds of European allies not contributing their fair share.

The two percent threshold holds enormous symbolic power for US decision-makers from both parties

While an election win for President Joe Biden would allay some of Europe's concerns, one should not assume that the United States would automatically continue to contribute the majority of transatlantic security requirements⁶ or support for Ukraine.⁷ In summary, while there will certainly be differences in the way Washington will deal with Europe depending on the outcome of the election, the common denominator is that Europe needs to do more to keep the United States in Europe. This course of action also clearly aligns with Germany's national interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on nudging decision- and lawmakers in Washington to keep their country engaged in Europe. At the same time, implementing them is in Europe's and Germany's own interest.⁸

Fulfill the NATO Pledge

Most urgently, European NATO allies must fulfill their NATO pledge to spend at least two percent of their respective GDP on defense. As the wealthiest European nation, Germany in particular should expect to be the recipient of more aggressive calls for increased defense spending. Yet despite Chancellor Olaf Scholz's commitment in the wake of the so-called "Zeitenwende," Germany may fall short of consistently meeting NATO's spending target in the coming years.⁹

Although the focus on the two percent target may seem somewhat arbitrary, it is politically immensely important for European allies to give proof of their commitment and to eventually reach that target. Not only does the two percent threshold hold enormous symbolic power for US decision-makers from both parties. Reaching it will also signal to the United States that Europe is serious about taking on more responsibility for its own security, thereby relieving the burden on the United States in the medium and long term.

Hence, Germany and other European NATO countries must come up with an actionable plan on how to sustainably allocate at least two percent of GDP to the defense budget. They could present this plan at the alliance's upcoming summit in Washington in July. With this in mind, Germany should understand that spending money is not an end in itself. The monetary funds are in fact urgently needed to be able to act on a number of defense requirements.

4 Dick Zandee, "NATO in the Trump era: surviving the crisis", Clingendael, September 2018: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/PB_NATO_in_the_Trump_era.pdf (accessed February 6, 2024), p. 4.

5 Doug Klain and James Batchik, "How Europe Can Prepare for a Second Trump Term – Now," Foreign Policy (January 2024): https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/31/europe-trump-second-term-russia-ukraine-biden-military-aid/#cookie_message_anchor (accessed February 12, 2024).

6 Daniel Fiott, "The Turning Tide? A European Agenda for the Washington Summit", CSDS, January 9, 2024: <https://csds.vub.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/202401160-IDP-Fiott-The-Turning-Tide.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2024), p. 5.

7 "The limits of 'as long as it takes': Why Ukraine's allies need to update their strategy," Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations (December 19, 2023): <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-limits-of-as-long-as-it-takes-why-ukraines-allies-need-to-update-their-strategy> (accessed February 14, 2024).

8 The recommendations are partly based on interviews conducted remotely with experts in the United States and Germany between December 2023 and February 2024.

9 Isabell Kump and Jintro Pauly, "Money Can('t) Buy You Force," Special Edition of the Munich Security Report on European Defense, Munich Security Conference (June 2023), pp. 19 – 30: <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/sonderausgaben/defense-sitters/defense-budgets> (accessed February 12, 2024), p. 23.

Resuscitate the Framework Nation Concept

Broadly speaking, European allies must prepare to fill the gaps in terms of strategic enablers that the United States is currently providing for the defense of Europe. Such equipment includes air lift capabilities, reconnaissance aircraft, air-to-air-refueling, and ISR aircraft and platforms. Germany should push for the Framework Nation Concept (FNC) to be used more actively to acquire these capabilities.

The FNC concept was originally set up to allow smaller states to gather around a larger European nation to jointly develop complementary capabilities. It would be well suited to compensate for capabilities that the United States might no longer put at the disposal of Europe's defense. Since it was Germany that initially developed the concept in 2013 and later introduced it into the NATO framework, it would be logical for Berlin to lead an effort to upgrade the FNC. The impact on the United States would be twofold: If European allies generated more capabilities of their own, they would relieve the pressure on American resources and at the same time signal to the Americans their willingness to take on more responsibility for transatlantic security.

Bolster NATO's Eastern Flank

European allies – and especially Germany – also need to fulfill their promises to bolster the alliance's eastern flank, particularly in Lithuania. Berlin must play its part in ensuring that the planned "Lithuania Brigade" becomes fully operational as quickly as possible. According to current planning, it is set to formally enter service in 2025 but may not reach full operational strength before 2028.¹⁰

To bridge the gap until the Lithuania Brigade can be permanently stationed on Lithuanian soil, Germany should consider assigning an additional Germany-based brigade to the defense of that Baltic state.¹¹ Furthermore, Berlin should encourage Canada and the United Kingdom to move beyond their current commitment to a rotational presence of troops in the Baltic states and permanently station brigades on Estonian and Latvian territory. This step would add credibility to NATO's deterrence and defense posture vis-à-vis Russia. Crucially, upscaling multinational

troops from the current battalion commitment to a brigade level in each Baltic country would shorten NATO's reaction time in case of an attack. With regard to the United States, these measures would serve as proof that its allies take their commitment to the continent's security seriously.

Step Up Support for Ukraine

Germany, along with other European allies, must further increase its financial and military support for Ukraine, especially in light of a possible decrease or even discontinuation of US help. Ukraine is a test case for what European allies are prepared to do for the security and defense of Europe. Increasing Europe's military backing for Ukraine carries the added advantage of signaling to China that NATO allies are serious about defending partner countries which have been attacked unprovokedly. Europe would thereby show that there is a unified "Western bloc."

European allies cannot afford to ignore the Indo-Pacific region

While letting Ukraine join NATO would be the best option for the country's security and defense posture, other options can be pursued while allies are trying to reach consensus on the when and how of Kyiv's membership. Germany should encourage NATO to offer Ukraine an enhanced Partnership-for-Peace (PfP) program. Such an upgrade could include an invitation to Ukrainian soldiers – when and where possible in light of the ongoing war – to take part in NATO training exercises such as Steadfast Defender. The symbolic importance of such a move would be underlined by the fact that NATO is commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Partnership-for-Peace programs this year.

10 Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, "Bundeswehrbrigade für Litauen: Verteidigungsminister unterzeichnet Roadmap", December 18, 2023; <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bundeswehrbrigade-litauen-minister-unterzeichnet-roadmap-5718672> (accessed February 6, 2024) and Aylin Matlé, "The Future of the Zeitenwende: Scenario 3 – Russia Masses Troops on the Latvian Border", IP Quarterly; https://ip-quarterly.com/en/future-zeitenwende-scenario-3-russia-masses-troops-latvian-border?_ga=2.87473688.1834941065.1706778830-1945390163.1697136185 (accessed February 6, 2024).

11 Aylin Matlé, "The Future of the Zeitenwende: Scenario 3 – Russia Masses Troops on the Latvian Border", IP Quarterly; https://ip-quarterly.com/en/future-zeitenwende-scenario-3-russia-masses-troops-latvian-border?_ga=2.87473688.1834941065.1706778830-1945390163.1697136185 (accessed February 6, 2024).

NATO members, especially bigger European players including Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and the UK also should start planning for the day that Ukraine will have joined the alliance. Some thought should be given to stationing multi-national troops on the scale of brigade-sized battlegroups with corresponding air power on Ukrainian soil as a deterrent against Russia once Ukraine has become a member. This would be a clear signal to the United States that Europe is willing to contribute heavily to Ukraine's defense and thus Europe's security.

Bring the Indo-Pacific into Sharper Focus

While the Euro-Atlantic theatre will remain the main point of reference for Europe's defense policy and planning, European allies cannot afford to ignore the Indo-Pacific region. An increased focus on security issues in the Indo-Pacific would strengthen cohesion between the transatlantic allies. This does not mean that Europe must necessarily deploy military capabilities to the region or blindly follow America's lead on China. Yet even small steps in terms of security policy could well have a positive impact on American engagement in Europe. At the very least, they would provide an argument for those in Washington that favor a continued US footprint in Europe.

Germany is already showing more interest in the region, not only because of the intensified US-Chinese geopolitical rivalry but also out of self-interest. Decision-makers in Berlin are increasingly coming to view the region through a security prism rather than solely through an economic lens. While it is safe to assume that the bulk of military projection toward that region will continue to be generated and carried out by the United States, Germany can take meaningful steps to further increase its own activities in the Indo-Pacific.

Firstly, Germany should push for the Alliance to open a liaison office in Tokyo. This is a logical step if NATO and its member states want to demonstrate that they are serious about the claims they have made over the past two years to cooperate more closely with partners in the Indo-Pacific theater.

Secondly, Germany should agree a joint response with its European partners to any Chinese attempt to forcibly change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, taking different scenarios into account. This message, directed at Chinese officials via various channels, should make it unmistakably clear that China would incur serious economic and diplomatic costs if it attacked Taiwan. While a certain degree of ambivalence

– as is common in deterrence signaling – would be prudent, the Chinese leadership should not be under the impression that Germany or Europe would sit idly by in scenarios involving aggression toward Taiwan.

Thirdly, Germany should continue to make use of military signaling to show that it takes the freedom of navigation and the compliance with international rules seriously. In 2021 and 2022, it sent a German frigate to tour the Indo-Pacific region which included passages through the South and East China Seas. That was a useful signal in that respect, even though Berlin shied away from having the ship sail through the Taiwan Strait. Another frigate is set to visit the region in 2024, with the exact route yet to be announced. If it were to include passage through the Taiwan Strait, Germany would send a clear signal to China that it strongly disapproves of any attempts to unilaterally change the current status between Beijing and Taipei.

To strengthen deterrence, Germany should also work more closely with European partners, mainly France and the UK, to deploy frigates in concert. Such a coordinated effort would not only send a strong signal in support of the rules based international order – a signal that would be received both by revisionist powers and by partners in the region. It would also serve to demonstrate that European nations can indeed work together.

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