



## **DEBATE: Is Trump Right to Demand that NATO Partners Pay More?**

**Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos**

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**Q:** Transatlantic relations have suffered since the advent of Donald Trump's presidency. While collaboration and mutual understanding were taken for granted on a plethora of issues of joint interest during the administration of Barack Obama, Trump approaches Europe with undisguised skepticism. Although he has softened his rhetoric since his 2016 campaign, the US and the EU have not yet worked through their mutual antagonism. One significant issue on the agenda is NATO defense expenditure per member state. BESA joins the debate by posing the question: Is Trump right to push NATO partners to pay more for their participation in NATO?

**Respondents: Steven E. Miller, Batu Kutelia, Bruno Tertrais, Sven Biscop,  
Anna Ahronheim, Tim Oliver, Torrey Taussig**



**Steven E. Miller, Director, International Security Program; Editor-in-Chief,  
International Security; Co-Principal Investigator, Project on Managing the Atom,  
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For almost the entire history of NATO, it has been normal for the US to urge its European allies to spend more on defense. This burden-sharing discussion has been a

regular item on the NATO agenda for decades and has sometimes produced intense disagreement. What Trump is doing is nothing new and is arguably an appropriate reaction to Russia's aggressiveness in recent years.

The context in which Trump's criticisms have been made is, however, unusual and disconcerting for multiple reasons. First, and most fundamentally, past disputes over defense spending within the alliance have generally taken place in an environment in which NATO was regarded as one of the essential pillars of American foreign policy and the US commitment to NATO was embraced by one administration after another (though sometimes in the face of domestic criticism). Trump, in startling contrast, has openly questioned the value of NATO, sometimes describing it as a burden. He has raised doubt about the US commitment to Article V of the NATO treaty, producing uncertainty about US reliability in the collective defense of NATO Europe. And he has, in various contexts, described NATO allies as foes of the US. Hence, Trump's fight with allies over defense spending does not seem a well-intentioned effort to strengthen the alliance, as was the case in the past, but rather part of a broader assault on NATO – an assault that is consistent with Trump's longstanding beliefs. Is he genuinely worried about improving an institution he described as “obsolete” during his campaign for the presidency?

This concern is reinforced by several other points:

- Trump's demands on the allies have not been for carefully and collaboratively developed programs for improving NATO's defenses. Rather, Trump has hurled at the allies demands that are unplanned, unreasonable, and infeasible – suggesting at the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, for example, that NATO Europe should rapidly more than double defense spending to 4% of GDP, a level that exceeds even US defense spending. Insisting that NATO Europe meet unachievable objectives seems more likely to humiliate allies than to help the alliance, but may help Trump persuade the American public that the European allies simply refuse to pay their fair share. Developing a program to build up the alliance is best done privately and seriously, not publicly and implausibly.
- The genuineness of Trump's push on NATO defense spending is undermined by his enthusiasm for Vladimir Putin and his apparently unquenchable desire for better relations with Russia. It is incoherent to be by far the foremost champion in the West of improved relations with Moscow while claiming that massive increases in defense spending are necessary for NATO. If Trump does not see Russia as threatening, as seems to be the case, then why is he worried about the adequacy of NATO's defenses?

- Trump's concern for NATO's finances seems rooted in a basic misunderstanding of how NATO works. He seems to regard NATO as a club in which members pay dues and he is adamant that most NATO European members have not been paying their bills and hence "owe" the US hundreds of billions of dollars. In his eyes, the European allies have been cheating the US and previous administrations were "suckers" to put up with this. However, NATO has never operated like an exclusive golf club and Trump's grievances are simply unrelated to how the alliance actually functions.

In short, Trump is raising a familiar and legitimate issue. Moreover, many would agree that increased defense spending in Europe is desirable. But he is raising this issue in a way that is damaging the alliance and that casts doubt about the genuineness of his desire to strengthen the alliance. Trump's performance at the 2018 Brussels summit came across as a public relations stunt designed to allow him to air his complaints about NATO rather than as a sincere attempt to address serious issues.

It is completely unsurprising that NATO defense spending declined as the threat from the East receded after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the emergence of a more assertive and bellicose Russia in recent years, there are certainly grounds for reexamining NATO's position and undertaking a realistic program of defense expansion in response. And in fact, this is exactly what NATO did at its summit in Wales in 2014, when the allies committed to a 10-year program of expanding defense spending, with the goal of 2% of GDP (which represents a substantial increase for many NATO members) and with an emphasis on investment in new equipment. If Trump were serious about strengthening NATO and redistributing the burdens within the alliance, he would focus on the sustained implementation of the Wales commitment rather than offering up brash accusations of dues-paying delinquency and loud demands for impossible instant increases in defense spending. Ironically, the immediate result of Trump's antics at the NATO summit in Brussels was a statement in the summit declaration of "unwavering" recommitment to the 2014 Wales program. Meanwhile, it is worth keeping in mind that NATO Europe outspends Russia on defense by five times and NATO as a whole spends 15 times as much as Russia. It is probably sensible to ask how much more is required and whether money is really the core problem before damaging the alliance with bruising public fights over defense spending.



**Batu Kutelia, Former Ambassador of Georgia to the US and Deputy Secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, Professor of Diplomacy, The New Westminster College of Caucasus University, and Fellow, The McCain Institute For International Leadership**

Yes, Trump is right to push partners to pay more on defense, just as the other NATO heads of states are right to commit to an increased defense investment pledge as reflected in all Summit declarations since the Wales Summit. As they declared, "Fair burden sharing underpins the Alliance's cohesion, solidarity, credibility, and ability to fulfill our Article 3 and Article 5 commitments."

An understanding of these higher needs was the result of a slowly catalyzed common threat perception now that Russia has embarked on the path of aggressive revisionism and undermining liberal world order. The first major indicator was the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia and subsequent invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, which were accompanied by military adventurism in the Middle East and direct or indirect support of rogue state or non-state actors.

In the NATO Summit Communiqué's wording, "Russia's aggressive actions, including the threat and use of force to attain political goals, challenge the Alliance and are undermining Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order."

In June 2014, after the reset with Russia had failed and three months after the annexation of Crimea, the Obama administration signed off on the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI). Through this vehicle it would increase the US presence in Europe to deter further Russian aggression. The Trump administration boosted funding for the ERI by \$1.4 billion, a 40% increase.

The allies have started to increase the amount they spend on defense in real terms and some two-thirds have plans in place to spend 2% of their GDP on defense by 2024. This is important progress, but much work remains. The other important question is if 2% should be a floor or a ceiling.

The credibility and success of NATO as a security organization depends on its ability to adapt to the rapidly changing security environment and its resolve in delivering on its commitments to fulfill its pledges. These goals are not instantly achievable, and

they require clear planning and demonstrated political will – not ambiguity wrapped in masterpieces of bureaucratic wording.

NATO has several important pledges and commitments on its agenda. Two of them are vitally important: an increase in defense spending for effective deterrence and the open door policy, which puts freedom and democracy on the offensive.



**Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Paris**

Trump is right and wrong at the same time. He is right to say that Europeans do not spend enough for their defense. In doing so, he says the same thing most other US presidents have said since the late 1940s. Many European countries rely too heavily on the US for their defense. It is a downside of the US guarantee to Europe. But NATO is only as good as the sum of its parts. Increasing European defense budgets is a responsibility vis-à-vis all allies – not only Washington. In an era of renewed threats against the European continent, from Russia to ISIS, too many European countries – in fact, most of them – spend less than 2% of their GDP on defense.

However, Trump is also wrong in both style and substance. In terms of style, his threats to stop upholding the NATO Treaty Article 5 commitment is damaging for transatlantic solidarity and cohesion, and thus also for deterrence vis-à-vis Russia. It may also be counterproductive: some in Europe now believe the security of the continent should stop being dependent on NATO. On substance, Trump is wrong to claim that the US is “paying for Europe’s defense.” The security of Europe is critical to the US: the US contribution is not a service that Washington provides as a courtesy.



**Sven Biscop, Director of the ‘Europe in the World’ program, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Brussels, and Professor at the Ghent Institute for International Studies, Ghent University**

Europeans, acting through the EU, have to acquire more military capability in order to ensure homeland security, contain instability in their neighborhood, and maintain the freedom of access to the global commons in the broader periphery. That is what I see as a minimum degree of strategic autonomy, a notion introduced in the EU's 2016 Global Strategy. That will require more defense spending, but above all it will require pooling the defense efforts of the EU member states.

Today, resources are wasted because of the fragmentation of the European defense effort over 28 armed forces. Even if all EU member states spend more, they will still remain too dependent on the US if they do so without stepping up cooperation, for each alone cannot afford the strategic enablers that today only the US has in its arsenal. This is why the EU has launched a mechanism for defense integration: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Europeans feel that through PESCO they are answering the call from the US to do more – hence their surprise when the Trump administration criticized the initiative.

Trump's ranting is counterproductive. Europeans know that it is motivated by fear that if PESCO works, Europeans will produce more of their own weapons and equipment and buy less American. And Trump's policies, notably his undermining of the nuclear deal with Iran, are seen as a direct threat to Europe's security interests. Trump is right that more defense spending is necessary, but his message is not getting across.



**Anna Ahronheim, Military & Defense Correspondent, *Jerusalem Post***

In July, US President Donald Trump called on NATO partners to spend 4% of their GDP on defense, doubling the current 2% paid by member states. Four years ago, NATO members made a commitment to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense by 2024. According to data released by NATO, several member countries increased their defense expenditures in the past year.

In 2017, Germany spent 40.447 billion euros (1.24% of its GDP) and is expected to spend 41.913 billion euros in 2018. France spent 40.852 billion euros in 2017 (1.78% of its GDP) and is expected to spend 42.748 billion euros this year (1.81% of its GDP). Trump, meanwhile, claims that the US is spending 4.2% of its GDP, but according to

NATO data, the US spent 3.57% of its GDP on defense expenditures in 2017 and is expected to decrease to 3.50% in 2018.

While the US is spending significantly more than its NATO allies, with increased security threats faced by NATO, specifically from Russia, member countries are moving in the right direction when it comes to burden sharing with the US.



**Tim Oliver, Associate, LSE Ideas, London and Senior Lecturer,  
Loughborough University London**

With regard to Europe: Trump, like other US presidents before him, is right to argue that European partners should spend more on defense because Europe has let defense spending slip too far. But it is a deceptively simple narrative to demand more money as the way to solve the security problems facing Europe and the US. Such an approach ignores the complexities of defense spending and the challenges facing NATO. Trump is a president who lacks a plan for this, or even the necessary focus to form one, and so is unlikely to go much beyond this crude approach.

Proportionally speaking, the US share of NATO defense spending is enormous. That gives it capabilities no other power has. But those capabilities are deployed globally and not simply in and around Europe and the North Atlantic. Assuming the Europeans do not wish to embark on a global role akin to that of the US, the question therefore becomes whether the Europeans spend enough to make up their share of the cost of defending Europe and the North Atlantic, and have the contingency to be able to provide support and plug gaps for when the US or a European power such as France or the UK has to shift resources elsewhere.

Furthermore, the way the money is spent can be just as important as spending it. Europeans could pour money into conventional forces designed to defend Europe, but would this meet what the US needs in terms of plugging gaps, especially in terms of more advanced military capabilities?

Boosting defense spending in Europe is necessary, but the debate and strategy should be more nuanced. The efforts to get Europe to spend more will require more than Trump shouting.



**Torrey Taussig, Non-Resident Fellow, The Brookings Institution, 2018-2019  
Robert Bosch Foundation Fellow, Berlin**

Burden-sharing debates within NATO are a time-honored tradition. US presidents have consistently called on European allies to spend more on defense. Most member states do not spend 2% of their national GDP on defense, which is the alliance's official goal. It is also true that the US spends more on defense than any other NATO member outright and in terms of GDP percentage.

That being said, President Trump's singular focus on defense spending, his transactional approach to America's closest allies, and his disregard for NATO's underlying purpose are far more damaging to the alliance than inadequate defense spending might be.

We should not ignore that underlying Trump's demands for more defense spending is the simple fact that he cares little about the alliance's future success. He does not view a strong Europe and a strong NATO as important for America's own security – a key divergence from prior US administrations going back generations. Trump also exhibits contempt for multilateral institutions, the rule-based international order, and democratic norms. Even if all NATO member states were to reach the 2% threshold, an unlikely feat, these aspects of Trump's worldview would not change.

It is a worldview that puts the credibility of NATO's Article 5 – an attack against one shall be considered an attack against all – at risk. It also creates deeper divisions in an alliance that relies on solidarity to develop coherent strategies towards current and future security threats. If NATO allies do not feel that America is a reliable partner, they will be left with no other choice than to move in a more independent direction. Adversaries such as Vladimir Putin are watching these widening cracks closely for an opportunity to exploit them.

**For Twitter dissemination:** #Trump #NATO #Russia #US #defense #EU

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