

Sharing the Defense Burden: What Europe No Longer Can - or Knows How to - Do

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Cracks are forming within the Western alliance: but they are not of a political nature. Western European countries are struggling to remain in line with their American ally, and a change in strategy has nothing to do with it: they simply can't keep up. Financial resources necessary to fund defense efforts are increasingly difficult to find and industrial standards are slipping across the continent.

The most visible kink in the European part of the NATO armor is, of course, financial. With military budgets pressed into the ground in most nations of Europe, armies across the old continent have been forced to mothball projects, outright cancel others, and drastically reduce the scale of those which remain. This meager funding is a problem for the United States, which heads the Atlantic alliance. As a *primus inter pares*, but a member nonetheless of NATO, America is expected to pay its share – albeit the bulkiest one, given its hegemonic economy. But even with regards to proportionality, European countries are nowhere near financial par. In 2017, the US floated over half of NATO's expenses, despite being one member among 29. CNBC Amanda Macias [reports](#):

"In 2017, the U.S. accounted for 51.1 percent of NATO's combined GDP and 71.7 percent of its combined defense expenditure. In short, the U.S. contributed more funds to NATO than Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and Canada combined."

As a result, Washington has been pressuring its transatlantic allies to increase their military spending. German news site Deutsche Welle reported: "

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said Germany should be more vigilant in increasing its defense spending, as 29 countries prepare to meet for a NATO summit on Wednesday. Stoltenberg said he welcomed the German government's pledge to increase the defense budget to 1.5 percent of GDP by 2024. But he said he expected the country "to do even more" to meet the 2024 alliance target of 2 percent of GDP that Germany and other NATO countries agreed on during a 2014 summit."

But it is doubtful that all European countries are willing, or even able to fork out more military dollars.

The military gap doesn't end there, and this situation is not only a question of defense budgets: Europe also lacks some strategic capabilities. The aerial technological shortage is especially visible on the strategic airlift. Due to political tensions and contract

mismanagement, Russians will [no longer be leasing](#) Antonov-124 to NATO, making the entire logistics burden rest on American capacities, as long as the A400 isn't fully operational. Even if the new military Airbus were up and running, its payload is still greatly inferior to Russian AN-124 120-ton capacity, making European transport contributions minimal and barely self-sufficient.

Finally, comes the question of industrial standards which have been slipping all over Europe. In some views, the American military industry is in better shape because the numerous conflicts in which the US has been involved in, in recent decades, has battle-hardened both troops and engineering firms. On the contrary, Europe has only engaged in comparatively smaller and selective deployments. Germany has been providing an unfortunate example of the capacity and quality downfall. Once known for its robust quality levels all across the industry and its tip-of-the-spear shipbuilding, German armed forces have recently been plagued with a string of embarrassing quality-related disasters. TKMS, the shipbuilding subsidiary of ThyssenKrupp, obtained a four-frigate contract from the German Navy, but delivered ships that were unseaworthy, leading them to be locked in their harbors. Defense specialist James Rogers [writes](#):

"Citing the German newspaper Kieler Nachrichten, the WSJ reports that the Baden-Württemberg experienced problems with its radar, electronics and the flameproof coating on its fuel tanks. During its sea trials, the frigate was also found to list slightly to its starboard side".

The 6 new German U-boats, which comprise the entire German underwater fleet, are all back in their pens due to maintenance and quality problems, effectively depriving Berlin of a submarine capacity – a large hole in any military defense plan. Defense News [reports](#):

"The German Navy's six-strong fleet of submarines is completely out of commission after the only operational sub had an accident off the coast of Norway on Sunday."

TKMS was previously seen as one of the best shipbuilding companies in the world.

Britain, the largest non-US NATO contributor, contributed to the European situation and has simply accepted the idea that it has lost its footing in the fold of nations. Geostrategy expert Matthew Jameson echoes former military chiefs of department and [writes](#)

"The first duty of any military is to be able to secure and defend the homeland of its country. If the UK military are not even up to this task, how can they be called a major military power and how can Theresa May with any credibility lecture other countries about their defence preparations when the UK military could not even defend the UK in the event of a major military attack?"

Put simply, neither the UK, nor any European ally, would have the funds to get anywhere near even contributions to the American war effort. And even if unlimited funds were available, the technological know-how would still lack.

America has been pounding the table and pushing its allies to step up their game. The election of President Trump has upped the inter-ally rhetoric, as the US no longer wished to

bear the brunt of the military defense effort. But even if the American rallying cries for a renewed onslaught are heard, it will probably take years to restore economic levels, quality levels within the industry or to close the technological gap.

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