



FPRI Still the One? The Role of Europe in American Defense Strategy

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Abstract: According to the 2015 National Security Strategy, the United States continues to rely on Europe as its most likely, most capable military partner for dealing with the most vexing security challenges. However, the conventional wisdom in Washington holds that European allies are not terribly capable militarily or very willing to use force. So why would the United States rely on such lax partners? In fact, the evidence on European defense spending, capabilities, and willingness is decidedly mixed, with many positive trends among the negative ones. To build on the positive, the United States can bring to the table assets and resources necessary to facilitate the transatlantic partnership before it needs to be exercised.

Why would the United States continue to look to European allies as military coalition partners of first resort, given increasing doubts about European military capabilities and political will? As in the United States, the European members of the alliance are undergoing a post-war drawdown in military force structure, compounded by economic sluggishness across Europe, as well as ongoing efforts to manage excessive sovereign debt. Despite the sense of urgency among some NATO member states in Eastern Europe, generated by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its invasion of the Donbas, force structure cuts and defense budget cuts have raised significant questions among American policymakers and defense experts on whether Europe really will be capable of militarily partnering with the United States in the defense of common interests.

Nevertheless, as seen in the 2015 National Security Strategy, Washington *continues* to place emphasis on working with European allies as its most important security partners across the globe. In fact, it is clear that Washington views Europe as the source of its most likely, and most capable, partners for dealing with the most vexing security challenges. Given the conventional wisdom regarding European capabilities and willingness, it seems particularly ironic that the United States would pursue such a policy.

However, the United States has several reasons—some quite tangible, others less so—for continuing to rely on those same allies in safeguarding common interests through a wide range of military operations and activities, and hence for continuing

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to build military capability and interoperability with and among its European allies. Clearly, this approach is not without some significant risk for the United States. Nonetheless, there are some risk mitigation policies that Washington can pursue to increase the odds that the objectives it espouses in its national security and defense strategies vis-à-vis European allies are more achievable. Put another way, the United States can take steps today to increase the likelihood that when it picks up the phone tomorrow in the hunt for coalition partners, its allies in Europe will answer the call.

U.S. National Security & Defense Strategy: Coalitions & Europeans Preferred



(NATO Member Countries)

Over the last few years, the defense budgets of several of the most capable European members of NATO have decreased steadily. This is partly the result of the sovereign debt crises that have played out to varying degrees of severity across Europe, which was compounded by the Great Recession.¹ Public sector spending has been cut in many European countries, particularly in defense, as governments have attempted to put their fiscal houses in order. According to one source, defense spending across Europe dropped by 12 percent in real terms from 2006 through 2012.² Although there is hope that such cuts will level off in the second half of the 2010s, if the pace of European economic recovery does not improve, there is reason to think further cuts to varying degrees across Europe in military structure, capabilities, readiness, and modernization are all in the offing.

Several factors beyond the Great Recession and the sovereign debt crises have played important roles as well. For instance, cuts in defense budgets reflected evolving threat perceptions in Europe—specifically, European publics generally have not perceived the world to be as threatening to their countries' interests as Americans

¹ Michael Birnbaum, "Cuts in European defense budgets raise concerns for U.S., NATO," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 2011.

² Eric Platteau, ed., "Defense Data 2012," *European Defence Agency*, 2013, www.eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-publications/defence-data-booklet-2012-web.

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