

The United States and Europe: Transatlantic Alliance or Amerexit?

Col. F. Charles Parker IV USA (Ret.)

Introduction

The United States is withdrawing from its long established forward position in Europe. Some of this could have been expected with the fall of the Soviet Union and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the withdrawal goes beyond that. The United States has reduced its military presence in Europe, especially heavy ground forces, over many years. It did not start with the current administration, but this administration accelerated the withdrawal. Why the United States has pursued this course is a subject for debate. That the U.S. has been pursuing this action is not in doubt.

The public justification underpinning the withdrawal is that the Europeans are not paying their fair share for their defense. The public U.S. line over many years is that the Europeans are not spending 2% of GDP on defense. This was the line of Rumsfeld¹, Bush/Gates, Obama/Gates,² Panetta,³ Hagel,⁴ Ash Carter⁵ and more recently Hillary Clinton,⁶ Bernie Sanders⁷ and Donald Trump.⁸ So there is continuity to this plan across the political spectrum.

Russia, on the other hand, has reorganized its armed forces and put significant resources into improving its armored capabilities, to include developing a dramatically improved new tank that may be more than a match for the M1 Abrams.⁹ With annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has been increasingly assertive in staking a claim to a European sphere of influence. U.S. tank strength in Europe went to zero in October 2013.¹⁰ The trouble in Ukraine began in early 2014. This is not a coincidence.

I do not believe the 2% of GDP argument addresses the correct question. The right question is “is a strong functioning NATO led by the United States in U.S. security interests or not?” If the answer is yes, the 2% of GDP argument is irrelevant. If the answer is no, the 2% of GDP argument is also irrelevant.

NATO works when the U.S. leads

Let me introduce myself. From 1988-1991 I was on the U.S. delegation to the Negotiation on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). In the CFE negotiation I chaired the working group that produced the definitions, counting rules and lists of then current equipment that counted for artillery, tanks and armored combat vehicles. Later, I worked at NATO for 18 years, from 1994 until 2012. During my first two years I was a Colonel in the United States Army and my job was Military Assistant to the Deputy Chairman of the NATO Military Committee. Thereafter I was on the International Staff, mostly in the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, but spent a few years in the Operations Division. I finished as the head of arms control coordination in Political Affairs. I am not much for civilian-military equivalent definitions, but for protocol purposes, if there was a meeting at the one-star level I counted. My immediate supervisor

was the Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy. This is to give you some insight to my access. I worked on Bosnia. I worked on Afghanistan. As head of arms control coordination I worked a lot with the Russians.

My experience has led me to conclude that NATO works when the U.S. leads. The Supreme Allied Commander is always an American, but I am not talking about that post. An example will help clarify what I mean by leading.

In Bosnia the plan was for NATO to replace the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR). It is reasonably complicated for one military force to replace another. NATO planned to send in a group of so called enabling forces, primarily communications folks and primarily American. They were supposed to build a communications architecture that would be available on day one of the deployment of NATO combat forces. Initially these soldiers would be tenants on UN installations. They would take their mission orders from NATO, but what time breakfast was served in the mess hall was up to the UN. When NATO had sufficient combat power in theater, NATO would assume command.

The UN commander was French General Bernard Janvier. The NATO Commander was U.S. Admiral Leighton Smith. These two officers met at NATO headquarters in my boss's (Vice Admiral Norm Ray) office to discuss this. In addition to the two commanders, my boss and I were present. The two commanders had no problems with the plan I just described.

However there was a serious U.S./French dispute over something called Transfer of Authority (TOA)—when would NATO assume command? The U.S. was disturbed that the American communications troops might appear to be under UN command due to the tenant arrangement. The U.S. wanted TOA to take place immediately upon the deployment of the enabling forces. France objected to the subordination of a large French combat force and a senior French General officer to a NATO force commanded by an American without substantial American combat forces in the theater. The French wanted TOA to take place much later. The dispute was never resolved. In the Military Committee debate the U.S. Military Representative (LTG Tom Montgomery) took the unusual step of withdrawing his objection to the French position because there was no military argument to support the U.S. position. He cautioned, however, that he did not believe the U.S. Ambassador would give in at the Council meeting, and he was right. Ultimately, the Council approved some diplomatic weasel wording that essentially left it to the commanders, which is what had to happen anyway. In the event, many nations including France were part of the NATO Force, but initially the main combat force was the U.S. 1st Armored Division.

The teaching point is that France—old pain in the neck, cheese eating, freedom fries France—was willing to subordinate its senior General and its combat forces to NATO/U.S. command *as long as there were American combat forces there on the ground.*

Now fast forward to Putin and Ukraine. On April 2, 2014, the Supreme Allied

Commander, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, gave an interview to CNN's Christiane Amanpour in front of NATO headquarters. General Breedlove informed her that NATO's Military Authorities had been tasked to develop "reassurance packages" for the Council by April 15. He thought the air and maritime packages were good but admitted the "ground piece" was more difficult.¹¹ This is a remarkably open statement. Why would he say that?

Russian Understanding

I will answer but I need to explain that Russia has precise knowledge of our strength in Europe and understands precisely how NATO works.

Even though Russia suspended its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in 2007, it did not withdraw from the Treaty until 2015.¹² In addition to considerable intelligence gathering capabilities, the Russians continued to receive from all other CFE participants including the United States the annual information exchange that identified our armor and artillery strength in Europe and told them where it was located. Down to the last tank. So they knew what we had because we told them.

Russia was a Partnership for Peace participant and a member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. NATO tried hard to portray Russia as not an adversary and in 1997 established the NATO-Russia Council that met at NATO headquarters. Russia has an Ambassador to NATO, with an office and a staff. They go to committee meetings and meet Allied diplomats and International Staff personnel for coffee and lunch to discuss issues. They go to receptions and host receptions. Although currently interaction is reduced, they have parking areas and badges that get them into parts of NATO that I can't get into without escort because I am retired. Putin knows how NATO works.

Even the way Putin approached the Ukraine crisis reflects that understanding. The hybrid warfare and his denial of Russian armed forces' direct involvement with the so-called little green men was specifically designed to undermine NATO's Article 5. The "ambiguous" war allows NATO nations more nervous about a confrontation with Russia the opportunity to claim to believe the Russian line that there was no direct Russian military involvement. But Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia all have Russian speaking minorities, just like Ukraine. Moldova has the Russian speaking Transnistria region. The rest of Moldova is Romanian speaking and has close ties to and a border with NATO ally Romania. So the question of the day is: would actions similar to Ukraine constitute an "attack" that would warrant an Article 5 "attack on one is an attack on all" response? The flurry of meetings at NATO where "reassurance packages" were needed was partly to discuss events in Ukraine and partly to discuss the worries of Allies like Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Romania.

Withdrawal

My children graduated from the Department of Defense Brussels American School, the last in 2006. For many years I have helped coach football and wrestling. The school is

small and when asked we always said it had about 300 kids. But now that is about 200 and we are at NATO headquarters. Our version of the state wrestling championship, “Europeans,” had well over 40 schools when I first got involved in 2003. This year there were 26 schools. What I have witnessed personally from this angle was matched by very real withdrawals.

Of course, some of this had to be expected. The Soviet Union collapsed and the threat of massive armored assault as the primary purpose for NATO went away. There were many debates over NATO adaptation though several key lines of thought emerged as a consensus, and consensus means the United States led the consensus. The first is that collective defense should remain NATO's core responsibility. Even if there was a hope that Russia would not be a threat, there was agreement that basic capabilities for high intensity conflict should remain. The idea is to deter some potential, as of that time unknown adversary, who, when asking himself what would it cost to be able to pose a threat to NATO successfully, would have to conclude that the answer is “too much.” Let me say that again. Maintenance of some high intensity conflict capability is prudent. Another conclusion was that future NATO operations would likely be on Europe's periphery calling for forces that are deployable and sustainable.¹³

But recall my point that NATO works when the U.S. leads. If NATO is to retain some capability for high intensity ground conflict, some U.S. conventional armored capability is required, though reductions over the course of the last two decades were to be expected.

Indeed, U.S. Army Europe had 213,000 soldiers in 1990 and this declined to 122,000 by 1992. One of the two heavy corps—VII Corps—deployed to Desert Storm and did not return. In addition to the armor and artillery remaining in active units, the U.S. had stored equipment in unit sets.¹⁴ This means that the soldiers in a tank battalion in the United States could fly to Europe and fall in on equipment that is exactly the same as the equipment they trained on in the United States.

The war in Iraq drained more heavy forces from Europe, but the Bush administration retained two heavy brigades, a Stryker cavalry regiment and an Airborne brigade in Europe. The administration had plans on the books in 2008 for withdrawal of the heavy brigades in the 2012-2013 time frame.¹⁵ The Russia/Georgia conflict in 2008, which included the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, put these plans on hold at least temporarily, but the Obama administration's “reset” with Russia also reset the withdrawal plans.

In January 2014 the United States deployed 29 M1 tanks to the Grafenwoehr training area in Germany.¹⁶ They were not in a unit, but were available for troops to rotate in and train on the tanks. Counting the other U.S. tanks in Europe, that brought total U.S. tank strength in Europe to 29. In October 2013, U.S. tank strength had gone to zero when the administration withdrew the 172nd heavy brigade combat team.¹⁷

This is the source of General Breedlove's unease with the “ground piece.” One possible

“reassurance package” option in response to Russian action in Ukraine could have been a large NATO “training” exercise in Poland, involving a significant amount of NATO armor. There were those in the United States and there would have been nations in the Alliance who would have been reluctant to undertake such an action because it would seem to be provocative to Russia. It would have been. That is the point. Whether it would have been the best option in 2014, however, is not the point. The point is that in 2014 such an armored deployment was not an option. NATO works when the United States leads and 29 tanks in a training area is not enough to lead. A large exercise in Poland would have been provocative. Allies would not provoke Russia, even with an American commander, without a fair amount of American soldiers and equipment sharing the risk.

While there may be many factors contributing to Putin's decisions relating to Ukraine, I am a big believer in chronologies. In late 2013, U.S. tank strength went to zero. In February 2014 then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel presented his proposed 2015 budget and proposed to disembowel the Army and crush the Air Force's ability to support ground combat because “changes in the strategic environment...make certain capabilities more critical than others in a time of relative austerity.”¹⁸ (The budget would have reduced the Army to its lowest troop levels since before World War II.) Among other cuts, the budget killed the Ground Combat Vehicle program and proposed to eliminate the Air Force tank-killing A-10 aircraft. Vladimir Putin starting in 2008 had increased his military spending by 30% and produced the new T-14 Tank by 2015.¹⁹ American and Russian military outlays were going in opposite directions. Armed with this knowledge, Putin also knew U.S. armored weakness in Europe and understood completely how NATO works. In March 2014, the conflict in Ukraine began.

If you don't believe me, on April 10, 2014 General Breedlove's spokesman revealed the problem with the “ground piece” by informing the press that a possible measure in response to the crisis would be to deploy a brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division from Texas to Europe to train with Allies in the east. This was “one of the many options on the table to reassure Allies.”²⁰ In other words, NATO had nothing on the table then. Retired Admiral James Stavridis, General Breedlove's predecessor, reacted in an op-ed by saying “this crisis could prompt a second look at the U.S. military posture in Europe.” He said, “We may end up with three or even four combat brigades back in Europe, as well as restoration of the combat aircraft cuts of recent years.”²¹ Because there was no U.S. armor then.

Redeployment?

Given the Russian aggression in Ukraine, NATO was under considerable pressure to react. After great debate, the Alliance approved something called the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) at the September 2014 NATO Summit in Wales. Due to some personal connections, I knew the poor International Staff guys working nights and weekends to produce the RAP. On the IS you work for all the nations and try to develop papers that achieve consensus. There were many mutually exclusive red lines between nations. Finally the Council did agree to create a high readiness task force and established eight

small (40 personnel and NATO pays only for the computers) international headquarters in Central and Eastern Europe. Further, they agreed to establish an enhanced exercise program with an increased focus on exercising collective defense capabilities.²²

In order to make all this work to any extent, some American armor was necessary. Thus, the consequence of Russian aggression in Ukraine was an apparent halt to the Amerexit. The United States deployed an Armored Brigade Combat Team temporarily to Europe, and has indicated that it will maintain such a force on a rotational basis. This includes two tank battalions for a total of about 120 tanks. However, there is a big difference in the level of commitment between permanently stationed forces and rotational presence. It has been said that virtual presence means to both friends and foes actual absence. For one thing, permanently stationed forces are accompanied by families, a major political sign of commitment.²³ This rotational deployment is an attempt to split the difference—rotational but constant. In February 2015 Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter explained, “it is not going to look like it did back in Cold War days, but it will constitute in today's terms a strong deterrent.”²⁴

Finally, two years after that exercise in Poland idea that should have been an option in 2014, last month NATO conducted Exercise Anakonda 2016 in Poland. It was a large exercise involving 31,000 troops from 24 countries, including 14,000 Americans, and importantly, American tanks. The amount of U.S. armor needed to make this happen turned out to be one heavy brigade—the same size force that the U.S. withdrew in October 2013 to take U.S. tank strength to zero.²⁵ Russia, naturally, criticized the exercise.²⁶ And to demonstrate the notion that some would consider such an exercise provocative, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned NATO against “warmongering” and said the exercise could inflame tension with Russia.²⁷

The Road Ahead

We still hear about the European freeloaders and the 2% of GDP argument. Secretary Carter presses on it. He congratulated the British for meeting the goal but urged other Allies to do the same. He has said that said that Europe needs to be a capable ally, but “that is slipping and that has to turn around.”²⁸ (Estonia, Greece and Poland met the target in 2015.) Mr. Trump had the same position in his foreign policy speech. In a March 22 interview with Wolf Blitzer of CNN, Mr. Trump said that “NATO is costing too much money...maybe we have to pay a lot less towards NATO itself.”²⁹ The “freeloaders have to provide their own security” line appears to be alive and well across the U.S. political spectrum and is still in place to provide cover and concealment in the future for a continued exit, an exit that appears to be an American strategic goal.

Let's look at the “how much this costs” issue. Admiral Stavridis has argued that while 2% is a reasonable benchmark, the most important issue is what capabilities do Allies bring to the table? Less than 2% spent wisely can be more effective than more spent unwisely.³⁰ Look at Slovenia. It is a tiny mostly landlocked country with a population of just over two million and a few kilometers of coastline. We should not expect a major maritime contribution from them. They do have mountains and have developed a

mountain warfare center that is available for training by members of the Alliance. This doesn't change the world but it does make sense.³¹ Nations need to negotiate closely with NATO force planners so that their spending maximizes Alliance capabilities. Admiral Stavridis also pointed out that non-U.S. NATO Allies spend a total of \$300 billion on defense. Taken as a collective number this is second only to the United States.³²

As I said in the beginning, while cost is important, all of this is not the right question for the United States. Why don't we start by asking "does a strong NATO led by the U.S. enhance U.S. security or not?" I am not arguing to ignore cost or to stop pressuring Allies to do more to contribute to NATO capabilities. However, let's look more closely at our costs. I assume, hopefully, that the United States will continue to maintain armed forces. Wherever they are they cost money. Ft. Bragg, Camp Pendelton, Nellis Air Force Base, San Diego, Guam, it doesn't matter. There are post/base exchanges, hospitals, and commissaries. Troops use training ammunition and fuel. They get salaries. If they are posted to a high cost area in the United States they get extra allowances. These are sunk costs. Is there an extra cost to basing overseas? Sure. But we always negotiate a Host Nation Support Agreement that helps defray the cost. If a forward position in Europe makes the United States more secure, the incremental cost over the sunk cost should be manageable. This is not for the benefit of Europeans. This is for the benefit of the United States. It also, as it turns out, enhances European security.

How about spending on NATO itself, to which Mr. Trump referred. There is no NATO army. There are commonly funded headquarters that give the Alliance the ability to achieve unity of command for an international force. The common funding pays the utilities, the guys who cut the grass and civilian staff's, like mine, salaries. The U.S. pays between 22% and 23% of that.³³ Military officers on the International Military Staff or at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) or in Afghanistan are paid by their own country. Whether a German officer in Brussels gets a housing allowance is up to Germany. On operations the rule is "costs lie where they fall." A German tanker can fuel a Dutch truck, but the Dutch will eventually pay for the fuel. Each nation is responsible for its own logistics, but things like lift can be shared. NATO nations do not have common equipment. The U.S. has Abrams tanks and the Germans have Leopards. We cannot exchange ammunition.

NATO is able to work together because the nations have common procedures. The language in the field is English. An operations plan or order may have many annexes at high levels, but the basic plan or order will have the same 5 paragraphs an American squad leader uses in an order to his squad. Using these procedures does not cost money. Since they are U.S. procedures there is not even an extra training cost for the United States, while there is for Allies. In other words, if this enhances U.S. security, it is a cheap deal.

In absolute terms, the commonly funded NATO budgets cost the United States just over 500 million—that's right million—dollars.³⁴ But, you may ask, what about indirect costs like NATO operations? I did cover that with "costs lie where they fall." Each nation is

responsible for its own logistics. Since NATO's biggest operation was ISAF in Afghanistan, I guess you could chalk up American costs for Afghanistan to NATO indirect spending since from 2006-2014 the theater was under NATO command. But to do that you would have to argue that the United States was supporting NATO in Afghanistan instead of the other way around.

Since I just referred to Afghanistan, I have one final point about the “freeloaders.” Once NATO assumed command of the theater in Afghanistan in 2006, the NATO commander was always an American. Under the command of officers with names like Petraeus, McChrystal and Dunford, the British have had about 460 soldiers killed in action. France about 90, Poland about 40, Denmark about 45, Romania about 80, Norway about 10 and so on for at least 18 nations.³⁵ Every coalition casualty is one less American casualty in a war that the United States was going to fight with or without NATO. As a proportion of population, Denmark's 45 killed in action is like 2,500 in the United States. That is not freeloading in my book.

The question now is “will there be a temporary or permanent halt to the exit of the United States from Europe?” Right now the U.S. position is a constant rotational U.S. armored presence. If the rotational presence changes from constant to intermittent it will be a sign that the exit continues. Rotational is just not the same level of commitment as permanent. The “2% of GDP and the European free riders” line is alive and well. Russian behavior indicates a long-term trend toward military build up, and assertive behavior outside Russia's borders. The check on Russia is NATO, and NATO only works when the United States leads. If NATO doesn't work, no European nation will be able to stand up to Russian direct or indirect pressure alone. Over time there will be increasing European accommodation with Russia.

Given the consistent direction over many years toward exit from a strong forward position in Europe, what I just said would appear to be a U.S. strategic objective. It would be difficult to fathom that decision-makers would not have some expectation regarding the possible outcomes resulting from their decisions. Therefore my question to this audience is why? I suppose that depends on what sort of world order you envision. With regard to Europe, it appears that the United States has been on a path of its own accommodation with Moscow that ultimately would preclude the check on Russia to which I just referred. If you believe that stability and security are best served by a United States playing its role in an overarching global system while Russia does the same, then we have been on the correct course. But if you believe world stability is best served by a system of stable nation states, with American security best served by cooperative but strong positions in the world, maintaining the check on Russia is important and affordable, and Amerexit should not continue.

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