

Commentary on “Trump, NATO, and Deterrence”

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In his paper, “Trump, NATO, and Deterrence,” F. Charles Parker IV argues that President Trump successfully pressured fellow NATO members to increase their own defense spending. But how much was this increase? We can assess this using data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which maintains a database on world arms expenditures. Selected data are compiled in tables following this commentary.¹ Table 1 compares European NATO defense spending in 1992, just after the Cold War ended, with spending during the Obama presidency (2009-2016) and the Trump presidency (2017-2020).

One can readily observe that at the beginning of the Obama presidency, many of the original European members of NATO had decreased their defense spending dramatically since 1992. Germany, in particular, spent over 30% less on defense in 2009 than she did in 1992. As Germany was and is the European linchpin of NATO ground power, this was a particularly significant reduction in capability to deter Russia. The European members

¹ The source is <https://www.sipri.org/databases>. Spending figures are in millions of constant 2021 US dollars.

of NATO who joined after 1991 generally spent more in 2009 than they had in 1992. However, European defense spending further declined over the course of the Obama presidency until about 2015. Greek, Italian, and British spending decreased notably. Poland was the exception to this trend, steadily increasing defense spending from 2009 to 2016.

On the other hand, European NATO defense spending during the Trump presidency increased significantly. Overall European alliance member defense spending was 21% higher in 2020 than it was in 2016. The members of NATO who had joined after 1991 had collectively increased their defense spending by 48% from 2017 to 2020, largely due to the exertions of Poland, Romania, and Hungary. The original European members of NATO collectively increased their defense spending by 18% from 2017 to 2020. Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, and Turkey greatly increased defense spending. By 2020, Germany, in particular, had almost regained her 1992 level of spending, while Denmark, Italy, Norway, and Turkey actually exceeded their 1992 level of spending. Accordingly, the Trump administration deserves great credit for pushing European allies to increase their defense spending well before Russia invaded Ukraine.

As Parker notes, the goal that European NATO allies should spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense long predated Trump. For example, in both 2006 and 2014, NATO defense ministers agreed “to commit a minimum of 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defence spending.”² Yet, as seen in

² “Funding NATO,” 1 June 2023.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm. “Wales

Table 2, over the course of the Obama presidency, European allies made little progress towards reaching this goal. By 2016, only five nations were at or near this goal—Estonia, Poland, Greece, Turkey, and Britain. By the end of the Trump presidency, ten nations were at or near this goal—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Greece, Norway, Turkey, and Britain—with Hungary and Italy not far behind. Trump thus deserves credit for successfully pushing allies to meet their commitments.

With the end of the Cold War, the strength of the US Army in Europe dropped precipitously from 213,000 soldiers in 1990 to 69,000 soldiers in 1998. Army strength in Europe further declined under Obama, from 35,000 soldiers in 2009 to 26,000 soldiers in December 2016. Obama also removed all US Army tanks from Europe by 2013. Trump did not appreciably strengthen the US Army force permanently stationed in Europe, which remained at about 26,000 soldiers through December 2020. However, the Trump administration allocated over \$20 billion to the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) from 2017 to 2020. This funding provided for the rotation of US Army armored forces through Europe, as well as for US Army exercises with NATO partners, the prepositioning of US Army equipment in Europe, the improvement of infrastructure in Europe to support military operations, and security assistance to European allies.³

Summit Declaration,” 5 September 2014.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

³ Congressional Research Service, “The European Deterrence Initiative: A Budgetary Overview,” 16 June 2020.

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1106137.pdf>. See also Michelle Shevin-Coetzee, *The European Deterrence Initiative* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI_Format_FINAL.pdf

The Trump administration provided Ukraine with about \$1.4 billion in foreign aid and over \$900 million in security assistance.⁴ While the Obama administration provided only non-lethal security assistance, the Trump administration provided lethal weaponry that included Javelin anti-tank missiles.

In conclusion, as Parker notes, the conventional wisdom is that the Trump administration undermined NATO and appeased Russia, but this is completely false. In fact, the Trump administration strengthened the US commitment to Europe and induced the Europeans to increase their defense spending. Trump also increased the scale of US aid to Ukraine and provided Ukraine with lethal weapons. Overall, Trump's policy was completely inconsistent with his purported "isolationism" and desire to appease Vladimir Putin.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and US Policy," 5 October 2021, pp. 32-33.

<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45008.pdf>

Table 1: European NATO Defense Spending (millions of constant 2021 USD)

	1992	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Albania	169	214	230	229	224	211	205	178	172	178	193	217	210
Bulgaria	1464	948	894	743	744	803	750	761	815	845	1043	2395	1199
Czechia		3025	2744	2471	2375	2265	2343	2340	2540	2391	2991	3296	3614
Estonia	56	394	377	401	469	484	518	564	607	624	657	701	780
Hungary	1816	1364	1224	1241	1181	1117	1100	1237	1413	1784	1615	2280	2954
Latvia	124	370	280	290	267	286	297	339	489	555	756	756	795
Lithuania	234	438	365	353	353	365	439	585.5	785	953	1147	1224	1275
Montenegro		78	80	78	69	63	66	65	71	73	77	80	88
Poland	4577	8126	8513	8632	8708	8637	9610	11436	10803	11047	12512	12723	14189
Romania	3417	2312	2129	2202	2142	2306	2519	2906	3067	4161	4628	5066	5419
Slovakia	1407	1232	1057	1057	1058	958	989	1173	1203	1224	1402	2002	2191
Slovenia	520	783	780	629	542	480	460	456	513	526	549	616	600
Belgium	6699	5909	5660	5461	5400	5263	5177	4985	4965	4968	5077	5190	5651
Denmark	4449	4270	4546	4237	4370	4008	3832	3792	4043	4124	4718	4868	5177
Germany	59183	44837	44946	44035	45293	43619	43671	44420	46348	47677	48993	53743	57056
Greece	5924	9667	7429	5981	5290	4940	4899	5196	5412	5408	5781	5684	6063
Italy	30031	33123	32177	31511	29128	28012	25860	24762	28051	28857	29146	28349	34804
Netherlands	13088	12606	12075	11669	10965	10213	10228	10203	10726	10960	11885	13181	13940
Norway	5040	5854	5762	5871	5978	6117	6382	6335	6575	7257	7645	8089	8196
Portugal	2886	3615	3541	3357	2942	3047	2814	2950	3535	2941	3304	3529	3433
Spain	17462	19939	20068	18513	18723	16334	16310	17337	16076	17791	18479	18658	18645
Turkey	7448	9614	9444	9525	9759	10022	10095	10388	12180	13072	16593	17638	16603
UK	64234	71743	70537	68153	66260	63838	62696	60286	60076	60186	60639	63158	64161

Table 2: European NATO Defense Spending, % of GDP

	1992	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Albania	4.7%	1.5%	1.6%	1.5%	1.5%	1.4%	1.3%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%
Bulgaria	3.0%	1.7%	1.6%	1.3%	1.3%	1.5%	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.4%	3.1%	1.6%
Czechia		1.3%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%
Estonia		1.8%	1.7%	1.7%	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	2.0%	2.1%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%	2.3%
Hungary	2.2%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	1.2%	1.0%	1.3%	1.8%
Latvia	0.7%	1.4%	1.1%	1.1%	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	1.5%	1.6%	2.1%	2.0%	2.1%
Lithuania		1.1%	0.9%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%	1.1%	1.5%	1.7%	2.0%	2.0%	2.1%
Montenegro		1.8%	1.8%	1.7%	1.7%	1.5%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.7%
Poland	2.2%	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%	1.8%	1.9%	2.1%	1.9%	1.9%	2.0%	2.0%	2.2%
Romania	4.2%	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%	1.5%	1.4%	1.7%	1.8%	1.8%	2.0%
Slovakia		1.5%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	1.7%	1.9%
Slovenia	2.2%	1.6%	1.6%	1.3%	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%	1.1%	1.1%
Belgium		1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%
Denmark		1.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.4%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.3%	1.3%	1.4%
Germany		1.3%	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%
Greece		3.2%	2.8%	2.5%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	2.5%	2.6%	2.6%	2.7%	2.6%	3.1%
Italy		1.8%	1.6%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.7%
Netherlands		2.2%	1.4%	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%
Norway		3.0%	1.6%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%	1.5%	1.5%	1.6%	1.7%	1.7%	1.8%	2.0%
Portugal		1.8%	1.5%	1.5%	1.4%	1.4%	1.3%	1.3%	1.5%	1.2%	1.3%	1.4%	1.4%
Spain		2.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.4%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%	1.2%	1.4%
Turkey		3.9%	2.5%	2.3%	2.0%	1.9%	1.9%	1.8%	2.1%	2.1%	2.5%	2.7%	2.4%
UK		3.9%	2.6%	2.5%	2.4%	2.3%	2.2%	2.0%	2.0%	1.9%	1.9%	2.0%	2.2%