

BRIEF

BURDEN-SHARING

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Complaints that the European Allies do not contribute enough to maintaining security on their continent have been a theme of Alliance politics for the entire period of its existence. Allies have consistently failed to find consensus on how the burden should be divided between the US and Europe and struggled to find meaningful ways to measure their contributions. Since 2014, when the Allies pledged to spend 2% of their GDP on defence, the burden-sharing question has, in public, at least, largely been couched in financial terms. According to this criterion, the European contribution, while substantially improved in 2024, has fallen short. If the European Allies are to persuade their transatlantic partners to remain committed to their security, they will need to step up in all areas and to reframe the burden-sharing debate.

CASH

The defence investment pledge, agreed at the Wales Summit in 2014, formalised an existing NATO defence spending guideline and committed Allies to “aim to move towards” spending 2% of GDP on defence within a decade, and to aim to spend at least 20% of this sum on major new equipment.¹ According to NATO’s most recent estimates, 23 Allies will meet the 2% pledge in 2024, up from 7 in 2022 and 10 in 2023. This year will also see the combined defence spending of NATO Europe and Canada exceed 2% of their combined GDP for the first time.²

As the most visible component of NATO’s informal burden-sharing triad (cash, capabilities and contributions) the GDP guideline has

assumed much political importance. It is, however, a poor indicator of the Allies’ military capability: it measures input not output, and relative not real expenditure. Furthermore, as Allies defence spending diverges (Poland is estimated to spend 4.12% of GDP on defence in 2024, and Spain only 1.28%) it will become increasingly difficult to agree on what the guideline should be. Critics can easily use performance against the 2% pledge, or against some other chosen figure, to make a case that (some) Allies are failing to meet NATO’s needs. Foremost among the critics has been Donald Trump, who has frequently complained that “nobody’s paying their bills.”³

NATO’s 2% of GDP guideline considers input not output, and relative not real expenditure

Calls for NATO to agree a higher defence investment pledge, mostly from Allies in NATO’s east, failed to find consensus at the July 2023 Vilnius Summit. Heads of state and government agreed minor changes to the form of the pledge—that spending 2% of GDP on defence should be an enduring, not a one-off commitment; that the pledge to spend 20% of their defence budgets on major equipment should be met in conjunction with the 2% of GDP pledge; and that “in many cases” expenditure above 2% of GDP would be needed to remedy shortfalls and meet the demands of a degraded security environment—but rejected any increase to the guideline figures.⁴ While there are again calls to raise the guideline to 2.5% or higher at Washington, the rather weak enhancements agreed in Vilnius suggest that

Allies will not be ready to commit to a new figure.⁵

There is little dispute that more investment in defence is needed to meet the demands of the current security environment. With the possibility of a second Trump term casting a shadow over the Washington Summit and, at best, an expectation that Europe will need to do more for its own security as the US prioritises other regions, the European Allies should be ready to commit to a more equitable sharing of the responsibility for transatlantic security. The discussion also needs to move beyond the cash leg of the burden-sharing triad.

Collective initiatives to increase levels of European support to Ukraine have largely been unsuccessful

SUPPORT TO UKRAINE

The military assistance committed by NATO's European Allies to Ukraine has been broadly comparable to that committed by the US—€71 billion versus €65 billion in the period January 2022 to April 2024.⁶ But Ukraine's needs are substantial and with the prospect of US assistance thinning, or even disappearing, the European Allies will need to do more if Russia is not to prevail.⁷ With regard to training, of the 130 000 Ukrainian troops trained in western countries, almost 85% have been trained in programmes led by NATO European Allies, including more than 50 000 through the European Union Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine (EUMAM).⁸

Military assistance has mostly been provided on a bilateral basis. Aside from EUMAM and the EU's European Peace Facility (EPF), collective initiatives to increase levels of European support have largely been unsuccessful and peer pressure has been the dominant driver. The EU failed, for example, in its initiative to deliver one million rounds of artillery ammunition in the year from spring 2023. An Estonian proposal that states should allocate 0.25% of GDP over four years to support Ukraine appears to have gained little traction beyond the Baltic region. And even the EPF has proved susceptible to squabbling among the

member states, being challenged by Germany and blocked by Hungary.⁹

NATO has shied away from initiatives that might suggest its direct involvement in the war. But in April, outgoing Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proposed a multi-year €100 billion common military assistance fund for Ukraine. This was poorly received and has since been replaced with an initiative requiring Allies to commit to collectively spend €40 billion per year for as long as is necessary.¹⁰ The details are vague and many Allies remain sceptical, but regarding burden-sharing, a key feature of Stoltenberg's proposal is his insistence that contributions should be equitable. He has suggested that dividing contributions according to a GDP key might be a way to ensure fairness, however, this would still leave the US responsible for more than half of the

total. Another option might be to divide contributions according to the same GNI key used by NATO to allocate its common budget: according to a special arrangement, the US pays a share of 22%—about half of what would be required by a true GNI key.¹¹ A fund or commitment established on this basis would both secure more stable support for Ukraine and allow the European Allies to demonstrate fairer burden sharing.

The European Allies should also sustain, or even increase the proportion of training they provide and be ready to assume the risk of training Ukrainian troops in Ukraine if this proves to be a practically and financially viable option.¹²

CAPABILITIES

Comparing the capabilities Allies make available for collective defence would be a more meaningful way to assess burden-sharing. It is well understood that the European Allies need to do more to address critical and longstanding capability shortfalls such as strategic airlift, space-based connectivity and communication assets, amphibious capabilities, medical assets, cyber defence capabilities and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities, and Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems.¹³

These shortfalls have been somewhat abstract. However, the regional defence plans agreed at

the Vilnius Summit are intended not just to be operational plans, but “the main driver for the organisation of [NATO] forces and the specific military requirements NATO asks of them.”¹⁴ NATO planners are in the process of allocating specific tasks to specific countries and units that will in turn be reflected in capability targets in the NATO Defence Planning Process. Reportedly, the targets allocated to European Allies will increase by about a third (and will require spending of around 3% of GDP if they are to be met).¹⁵

Implementation of these capability targets thus offers a defence output-based measure of burden-sharing with real meaning: the degree to which the European Allies meet the demands placed upon them by SACEUR’s plans for the defence of Alliance territory. NATO defence planning is largely classified, and public scrutiny of this measure will be difficult. However, at least two Allies (Denmark and the Netherlands) have elected in the past to make public the unclassified summary of the NATO Defence Planning Capability Review for their own armed forces.¹⁶ It would be in the interests of burden-sharing, as well as transparency of defence spending in this new era of defence planning, if other Allies were to agree to do likewise.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Historically, the contributions leg of the burden-sharing triad has concerned the forces Allies have provided to NATO missions. NATO leads fewer and smaller out-of-area missions than it did during the post-Cold War period, but the largest of these, KFOR, is 87% staffed by European Allies.¹⁷ In today’s security environment, the contribution Allies make to collective defence is a more relevant consideration. One important measure may be the contribution Allies make to the NATO Force Model. Agreed at the Madrid Summit, this aimed, by 2023, to have around 800 000 troops available in three tiers of readiness ranging from 10 to 180 days.¹⁸ NATO claims that “today we have 500,000 troops at high readiness across all domains, significantly more than the goal that was set at the 2022 Madrid Summit,”¹⁹ although it is not clear into which tiers these forces fit and thus how this number relates to

the Madrid agreement. Nor is it publicly known—though clearly it is important for assessing burden-sharing—how many of these troops are European.

Implementation of capability targets offers a defence output-based measure of burden-sharing

NATO might also pay more attention to the Allies’ participation in the Standing Naval Forces (data does not appear to be publicly available), enhanced Forward Presence (few details are available, though the US is present in five of the eight battlegroups even if the European Allies provide larger numbers of troops overall), and air policing (European Allies have conducted 111 of the 117 Baltic Air Policing rotations). The various US bilateral arrangements that involve around 100 000 active-duty US personnel deployed to Europe are, while not strictly NATO burden-sharing, an important element of the overall picture.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Burden-sharing assessments might also, in the longer term, be extended to other areas. Russia’s war in Ukraine has highlighted critical inefficiencies in the defence industry on both sides of the Atlantic. Investment will be needed to ensure defence innovation, capacity, and security of supply for collective defence efforts and, more immediately, to provide Ukraine with weapons and ammunition and assist it in the establishment of its own defence industrial base for the longer term. Both NATO, through the Defence Production Action Plan, and the EU, most recently through the European Defence Industrial Strategy, are taking steps to address these problems. But this is a somewhat more controversial issue, as a greater European share of defence industrial production will also mean more competition for the US. More controversial still, but a logical extrapolation of Europe’s fear of abandonment by a second Trump Administration, is the idea that Europe may take a greater share of the nuclear component of collective defence and deterrence.²¹

Meanwhile, the 2% of GDP guideline has assumed a political importance beyond its value as a measurement of burden-sharing. In

Washington, the European Allies should attempt to broaden the debate. But at the same time, if they are to strengthen their own security and make the case for continued US engagement on their continent, they should commit to doing more across the whole range of the cash, capabilities, and contributions triad.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁴ NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué," para 34.
- ¹⁵ "[Can Europe defend itself without America?](#)" *The Economist*, 18 February 2024.
- ¹⁶ NATO, "[NATO Defence Planning Capability Review 2019/2020. Denmark. Overview](#)," 14 October 2020; NATO, "[NATO Defence Planning Capability Review 2021/2022. The Netherlands. Overview](#)," 7 October 2022.
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- ¹⁸ NATO, "[New NATO Force Model](#)."
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- ²⁰ Seth G. Jones, Seamus P. Daniels, Catrina Dooxsee, Daniel Fata and Kathleen McInnis, *Forward Defense: Strengthening U.S. Force Posture in Europe* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2024), 12.
- ²¹ Carine Guerout and Jason Moyer, "[France wants to extend its nuclear umbrella to Europe. But is Macron ready to trade Paris for Helsinki?](#)" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 10 May 2024.

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