

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Rebalancing NATO

The United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have both been around for more than half a century. However, the latter has been much more successful than the former. Why? Although the UN has done good work, most notably through its special bodies, such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), it has been unsuccessful in establishing a global regime of collective security for its members.

By contrast, NATO has been one of the most successful international organizations ever. Established in 1949 to contain communism, it has now survived its former opponent by nearly a decade and a half. Yet far from outliving its usefulness, central and east European countries are clamoring to be admitted into the alliance. Why?

For more than half a century NATO has successfully created a secure space free from the scourge of warfare. It might now be said to be functioning primarily to keep its members from fighting each other, much as it prevented Greece and Turkey, which joined in 1952, from going to war on at least four occasions. The death of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 left a security vacuum that NATO would appear to be ideally positioned to fill. The lure of military protection as found in NATO is as strong as—and possibly stronger than—the lure of economic prosperity in the European Union.

The trouble with NATO, however, is that its zone of peace is an unbalanced one, based primarily on overwhelming American military dominance. This imbalance can be seen in two ways. First, as the US is by far the largest and wealthiest of the NATO members, it can afford a substantial military capacity in absolute terms that the others cannot. But second, even as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), military spending in the US is higher than that of most other members. According to the US defense department, in 2000 the US spent just short of 3 percent of its GDP on defense. Only Turkey and Greece, less prosperous

countries, spent proportionately more, at 5.71 and 4.92 percent respectively. Other NATO members devoted a much smaller share of their resources to defense. Canada, for example, spent 1.17 percent. An increase of military expenditures closer to 3 percent of GDP by other NATO members might enhance the collective power of Europe and Canada vis-a-vis the US, for the net effect of the current low spending levels is to magnify further the American influence within the Atlantic alliance. Since 9/11 this influence has only increased, as US defense spending is now variously estimated to stand at between 3.2 and 5 percent of GDP.

Over the long term, it is in no one's interest to permit this imbalance within NATO. Last year's attack on Iraq has deepened the divisions within the alliance, as Europeans and Canadians alike have generally responded adversely to American defense policies under the current president. Yet without a commitment to augment their own military capabilities and thereby to carry their fair share of the burden of the common defense, these countries' governments are tacitly consenting to live under American protection and priorities. This is not good for these countries, whose legitimate interests deserve just treatment but are likely to be eclipsed in a US-dominated alliance. Nor will ordinary Americans, who are currently acquiescing in the efforts of their leaders to reorder the world, wish to send their own young men and women overseas to defend, say, Estonians and Hungarians, if the perceived interests of Americans are not obviously at stake.

NATO must be rebalanced to make it less American-dominated. Responsibly boosting defense expenditures by the other members of the alliance would be a start towards developing a more equitable zone of peace in Europe and North America.

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