



Forum for American Leadership

Europe Is Stepping Up On Defense And Ukraine, But Obstacles Remain

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Over the past several months, America's European allies have begun to take greater responsibility for their own security. Many U.S. allies have stepped up spending on defense, and Europe as a whole has taken up the slack in providing aid of all kinds to Ukraine. Europeans' embrace of these burdens has been long and halting, and obstacles remain. But recent developments illustrate a clear trajectory toward a more militarily competent European pillar in transatlantic defense.

All of this is good news for the United States. With the Ukraine war stretching into its third year and tensions mounting in both the Middle East and Indo-Pacific, we need Europe to be able to handle as much of the task of self-defense as possible. That, in turn, depends on Europeans sustaining the current momentum for many years to come. Already, some allies are reverting to old habits. Economic and political pressures threaten to derail spending promises and undermine European commitments to Ukraine over the long haul. And NATO's largest Western European members have not kept their promises to reinforce the Alliance's Eastern flank.

The Biden Administration needs to keep up the pressure on allies to follow through on their commitments. U.S. admonitions are likely to ring hollow, however, unless we increase defense spending, reform our own defense-industrial base, and provide all the help we can to Ukraine.

Europe Is Stepping Up

Europe has long neglected defense while its societies grew accustomed to reaping post-Cold War peace dividends. The Ukraine war exposed the unsustainability of this approach. Over the past two years, European allies have done a lot to enhance their own security.

In 2022, Europe spent an aggregate of \$260 billion on defense, which marked a six percent increase over the previous year. This represents the largest increase for Europe in the post-Cold War period.

- Frontline allies led the way. In 2022, Finland's defense spending increased by 36 percent, Lithuania's by 27 percent, Sweden's by 12 percent, and Poland's by 11 percent. In 2023, 28 out of 31 NATO members increased their defense spending.
- Poland, which was already spending 2.4 percent of GDP on defense in 2022, increased spending to 3 percent of GDP in 2023, and plans to spend more than 4 percent in 2024.
- Finland, Romania, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic all crossed the Wales 2 percent threshold in 2023.
- Germany established a €100 billion defense fund, increased its defense budget by several billion dollars, and has used funds from other departments to accelerate its military programs. Berlin expects to meet the 2 percent threshold this year with the help of a \$9 billion infusion from the defense fund.
- France has proposed \$433 billion in defense spending for the period of 2024-2030. This would represent a 35 percent increase—the largest of its kind in more than half a century.

- The United Kingdom announced that defense spending will increase by \$6 billion over the next two years. The funds will be used to modernize nuclear forces, replenish supplies, and invest in a more robust domestic defense industrial base.

In addition to defense budget increases, European allies have also increased defense investments. These amounted to \$63 billion in 2022 (up 7 percent over 2021), most of which went toward the procurement of new equipment. Over the past two years:

- Poland has spent \$15 billion on Apache and AW149 helicopters, \$15 billion on Patriot systems and missiles, \$10 billion on HIMARS rocket launchers, \$4.6 billion on F-35s, and \$1.4 billion on Abrams tanks.
- Germany has agreed to spend \$8 billion for 35 F-35s, which will enable it to stay in NATO's nuclear-sharing program. It also spent \$4.2 billion on Arrow-3 missile defense systems.
- The UK spent \$1 billion on 3,000 AGM-197A missiles and another \$3.3 billion on replenishing weapons and munitions stockpiles.
- Romania announced plans to spend \$6.5 billion on F-35 fighters and \$1.1 billion on Abrams tanks.
- Estonia and Lithuania have spent a combined \$700 million on HIMARS launchers and missiles, with Latvia also poised to purchase several hundred million dollars worth in 2024.

Backstopping Ukraine

European allies and partners have also demonstrated their commitment to Ukraine through a mix of military aid and highly concessional loans and grants. While initially lagging behind the United States in aggregate contributions, Europe now accounts for more than double the U.S. amount overall. Critically, Europe has signaled its enduring support by guaranteeing multi-year aid packages.

- Germany has allocated \$38.3 billion in support, including \$5.4 billion in direct military contributions and \$10.6 billion in future security commitments.
 - German security assistance includes 2 Patriot systems, 52 GEPARD air defense tanks, 90 infantry fighting vehicles, 18 Leopard II tanks and 115 Leopard I tanks, as well as supplemental "winter packages" including \$1.5 billion in air defense systems. Germany has also trained 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers and plans to train 10,000 more this year.
- Poland has allocated \$8.5 billion in aid, including \$3.2 billion in military support. Warsaw has also shouldered more than \$17 billion in refugee costs.
- The UK has allocated \$15 billion to Ukraine with roughly \$7 billion in military support.

EU institutions are also playing a vital role in coordinating aid to Ukraine and establishing the political and institutional mechanisms to maintain the flow of aid over the long term.

- Altogether, the EU has allocated \$92 billion to Ukraine, including \$6 billion thus far in military aid. This includes \$3.4 billion allocated for lethal equipment, \$415 million for

nonlethal supplies, and \$2.1 billion designated for the provision of 1 million rounds of ammunition to Ukraine (although this was not accomplished, as promised, within a year).

- The EU is considering an additional \$55 billion in financial assistance and \$22 billion in military aid to Ukraine for the 2023-2027 period and possibilities for using frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine's reconstruction.

Obstacles Ahead

There are a number of obstacles to Europe continuing to take its own security seriously.

- In Germany, constitutional constraints have thrown a wrench in the government's budget and raised concerns about pauses to future defense spending increases.
- Altogether, 20 European members of NATO continue to fail to meet the 2014 Wales Pledge to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense, and three members have not increased defense spending at all since the start of the Ukraine war.
- Many Western European allies have failed to follow through on their promises at the 2022 Madrid Leaders Meeting to raise troop deployments on NATO's Eastern flank to the brigade level. These should be permanent deployments, rather than one-offs for exercises. Until these conditions are met, the burden of defending frontline NATO will fall disproportionately on frontline members—and U.S. forces.
- At the EU level, restrictions on member states' ability to assume debt pose challenges to planned military investments. Changes to the rules allowing member states engaged in cross-border EU defense projects more time to reduce public debt would help, but they wouldn't eliminate the problem.
- Hungarian and Slovak opposition to additional EU aid to Ukraine has exposed serious fissures within the bloc. As the war drags on and the economic impacts of global instability continue to be felt, political divisions such as these may grow stronger.
- The long-term willingness of European publics to sustain high defense spending at the expense of other social budget priorities, or for European youth to accept military service in larger numbers, remains to be seen.

Keeping Up the Momentum

The United States should welcome Europe's newfound seriousness about security. It is natural and right that our allies should take the lead in a conflict raging on their own continent. But the hour is late, and sustaining the new momentum will require more than back-slapping. Viewed in aggregate, Europe remains woefully behind in military capabilities and preparedness. Prevailing upon our allies to keep up their current focus over a period of many years will be essential for ensuring America's ability to handle the growing security threats from multiple opponents.

It's important to remember that Europe's seriousness did not emerge in a vacuum; it came about because of a combination of U.S. political pressure, applied in different ways across several administrations, and geopolitical events that dramatically demonstrated the dangers of unpreparedness. The goal of U.S. policy should be to ensure that Europe remains committed to self-defense and helping Ukraine even as the war slips from the forefront of public consciousness.

- For the foreseeable future, the most effective approach is likely to be public praise for European efforts coupled with behind-the-scenes pressure to sustain the momentum.
- In particular, the United States should emphasize the need for Western European allies to make the promised and long-overdue troop increases on NATO’s Eastern Flank. Our message should be that improving European security is not just about how much money is spent but the willingness to place forces where they are needed most to improve deterrence.
- The United States should insist that European support for Ukraine remain at least proportionate to Europe’s share of transatlantic gross domestic product.
- At the same time, to be effective, U.S. messaging must be accompanied by a clear demonstration of U.S. commitment to NATO Article 5, via a robust extended deterrence.
- We should also encourage allies to tackle endemic problems in Europe’s defense-industrial base, where fragmentation and incoordination continue to hinder acquisition processes. Embracing a holistic, EU-wide approach to defense investment will require extensive institutional effort and political courage from national leaders.

The United States will be most credible in its messaging to allies if we improve our defenses at home, including by raising defense spending and taking on overdue reforms of the U.S. defense-industrial base. It’s vital that allies be continually reminded of the stakes for their own security and for the transatlantic relationship, as self-help is the surest way to reinforce Americans’ willingness to support Europe.

This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership’s [Europe](#) Working Group.

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