

**Frédéric Pesme**

**Specialist in European defence issues**

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European Defence is not a burden –  
Allies should rather share responsibilities

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The question of burden-sharing has become today a prominent feature of the transatlantic debate, which sometimes transforms the Alliance’s political meetings into public display of European repentance, reflecting a rather negative image of its cohesion. Even if the Biden administration seems to be more discreet on this subject, the US expectation obviously remains the same. However, can Europeans talk decently about a burden when it comes to their security and defence? Shouldn’t they be looking for a more positive and active role by proposing to share responsibilities, which would paint a more constructive picture of the transatlantic relationship?

The burden we are talking about is the one that weighs on the American taxpayer due to the lack of investment by the Europeans in military affairs. In 1948, when discussing the Washington Treaty, the Americans recognized that, unlike 1914 and 1939, they could not remain passive if a new conflict broke out in Europe. However, a very strong resistance remained to accept the risk of complicating their relationship with the USSR, of finding themselves forced to intervene militarily in European affairs and of placing an unacceptable burden on the American taxpayer. This is why the United States initially conceived their engagement to be temporary and, from the 1950s, encouraged the Europeans - notably the United Kingdom, France and Germany - to “share the burden” by developing a credible and autonomous defence against the Warsaw Pact<sup>1</sup>. It was assumed that a greater European responsibility would then allow the withdrawal of American troops from Europe. In Lisbon in 1952, the Allies agreed ambitious capability objectives which they then failed to achieve and Washington quickly became concerned about the European “free riders” taking advantage of the American security umbrella. This situation continued throughout the Cold War, without Europeans agreeing to shoulder a greater share of the burden, despite persistent threats of a

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua R. Shifrinson, “The Dominance Dilemma: the American Approach to NATO and its Future”, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2021.

reduction or withdrawal of US forces from Europe. The dispute over burden sharing has endured and is today a persistent irritant in the transatlantic relationship.

Nevertheless, this question is not restricted to the financial aspects. The “burden” also relates to the readiness, responsiveness and availability of forces to meet NATO's operational requirements. The Americans are therefore also expecting more from the Europeans in this area. The wars in the Balkans, and in particular the 1999 campaign in Kosovo, confirmed these concerns. The Prague Summit in November 2002 might have given the impression of a breakthrough. Indeed, the Allies decided to create a rapid reaction force (exclusively European) - the NATO Response Force and to engage in a capability initiative to support it - the Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC). Already at that time, Washington tried to introduce a 2% of GDP target for defence spending, which the Allies discarded. Twelve years later, when the Ukrainian crisis erupted, it became clear that this was only an illusion: the NRF was not operational, the capabilities were not developed, and only three of the Allies reached the 2% of GDP mark. Meanwhile, the operation in Libya in 2011, in which the Americans only wanted to “lead from behind” had shown that progress was still insufficient.

The ability and willingness of the Europeans to meet these two facets of the burden is still unclear and it will therefore remain a point of contention if they fail to do so. Nevertheless, they have made real investment efforts since 2014 (eleven Allies have now reached the 2% mark agreed at the Wales Summit and the defence budgets of the non-US Allies have increased by 190 billion euros) and this effort should endure. In addition, the 21 Allies that are also EU members are investing through the European Defense Fund and developing capabilities through the Permanent Structured Cooperation. They could also decide to do more and agree to establish political command structures for EU led operations, setting the stage for a greater NATO-CSDP cooperation. It is thus perhaps time to take advantage of the forthcoming discussions on the Strategic Concept, to give a more positive tone to this debate. When the Americans are looking more and more to their West, the Europeans should stop considering the security of Europe as a burden and instead propose to share responsibilities. This would also force them to accept greater leadership on defence and security issues.

In fact, the Americans seem ready to accept a greater European responsibility for the security of Europe<sup>2</sup>, but they question the Europeans' ability to do so. On the other hand, the Europeans seem ready to take a more active role, but they fear that this will lead to a decline in American interest in European affairs. They must therefore resolve the “Euro-Atlantic security dilemma” which captures Europeans’ contradictory interpretations of the impact of a stronger European defence in Washington. For some, this would lead the USA to withdraw from European affairs, for others on the contrary, it is the sine qua non condition for Americans to take Europe seriously. This debate has paralyzed any prospect of progress in European defence since 1947<sup>3</sup>.

To build confidence on the American side, the Europeans must also convince themselves that they can act on their own and they should accept to quantify how they will share

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<sup>2</sup> Max Bergmann and Benjamin Haddad, “Europe needs to step up on defense”, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 November 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Jolyon Howorth, “The Euro-Atlantic Security Dilemma: France, Britain, and the ESDP”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2005.

responsibilities<sup>4</sup>. In 2013, NATO proposed to develop two distinct but complementary capabilities to conduct full spectrum operations, one provided by the United States, the other by the European Allies collectively. This would have enabled Europeans to exercise greater responsibility while contributing to a more equitable burden sharing. The Europeans rejected this proposal, even though the Americans supported it<sup>5</sup>.

In an era of strategic competition, it is in the interest of the Allies to stop tearing each other apart over burden sharing issues. They must materialize their cohesion and strength through a positive message. The Europeans should forget their addiction to a US security guarantee because it will become harder to explain to the US taxpayers why their country of 300 million people shall guarantee the security of a group of wealthy nations of 500 million people. The Europeans should thus take advantage of the forthcoming discussion on the Strategic Concept to seize the initiative and propose to share the responsibility of the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. This would display the image of a more healthy relationship and a stronger Alliance. However, such an initiative will rely on trust: Americans' trust that Europeans are serious. Europeans' confidence in their own abilities.

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Binnendijk and Alexander Vershbow, "Needed: A Transatlantic Agreement on European Strategic Autonomy", *Defense News*, 10 October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Diego Ruiz Palmer, "The Framework Nations' Concept and NATO: Game changer for a new strategic era or missed opportunity?", *NATO Defense College Research Paper 132*, 2016.