

The German Desk: US and German Relations in NATO

Introduction

As the United States continues to lead its allies in NATO, new global challenges require NATO members to strengthen their commitment to the Alliance. The previous administration perpetuated significant strains on the US's relations with its key allies, yet US interests in NATO have extended through several administrations. Germany, a key US and NATO ally, has continuously failed to support US leadership through increasing its commitments to our joint alliance. German officials have continuously avoided addressing Germany's failure to adhere to their financial commitments, and instead have notified the US and its allies that Germany expects yet even more delays to its targeted goals for increasing defense spending. With new security threats arising, the United States must lead an appropriate solution to holding NATO members accountable for providing adequate financial contributions. This policy recommendation will provide an overview of the current diplomatic situation with Germany, diplomatic challenges the US administration currently faces, and recommendations for addressing US-German relations in NATO.

US-German Relations in NATO: A Brief Background

Since its inception in 1949, US membership in NATO is committed to a pact of mutual assistance to promote democratic values and enable members to consult and cooperate on defense and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, prevent conflict. With US leadership, NATO is prepared to address the growing military and security challenges arising in the 21st century, with current operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, African Union, and the Mediterranean. US and Germany's relationship via NATO is historically rooted in the post-WWII development of Germany's military and government. Our approaches to West Germany following the end of WWII, supported the creation of a security apparatus in West Germany, a transition to reunification, and ability for the unified Germany to reintegrate in Europe, and regain sovereignty. Since its development, Germany has contributed military

personnel and equipment to its NATO allies. With about 4,700 personnel dedicated, logistical support provided in the Baltic region via personnel and military equipment, and maritime support for security operations in the Aegean Sea, the country provides some notable contributions to organization. In addition, Germany has provided critical support for US operations in Iraq, and Afghanistan, and has contributed to negotiation efforts during the talks to draw down NATO troops in Afghanistan. Yet, its inability to increase necessary expenditure for defense spending, forgoes Germany's responsibility to engage in NATO's mission to protect member states and deter security threats.

Germany in NATO: A Look at the Numbers

Though 2021 estimates report a record high defense budget for Germany, estimated at \$63.8 billion, former Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer claims that Germany will now reach the 2% GDP goal by 2031 (Taylor, *The Washington Post*). Germany's defense spending has steadily risen annually by an average of 3.2%, yet its annual growth must increase above the current average in order to reach its target goal. Germany significantly lacks adequate military equipment, and in order to prepare for major security threats, the country must increase their equipment expenditure. NATO guidelines specify equipment expenditure to constitute a minimum 20% of total defense budget. According to 2019 data, Germany spent only 16.4% of their budget on military equipment (Public Diplomacy Division, 3). In addition, the German Defense Minister, von der Leyen, made a request in 2018 for \$553 million to purchase 18 items of military equipment.

According to reports, the Finance Ministry provided only half the requested amount (Chase, *Deutsche Welle*). Of the 114 Eurofighters and Tornado fighter jets, the country only has 38 and 29 operational models, respectively. In addition, German officials seek to argue the definition of defense spending and are attempting to skew the US's expectations for defense spending.

According to Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, member of the Christian Democratic Union, the current party has recommitted its efforts to reach the goal by 2024, and has adopted a straightforward approach to defense spending. However, other German political parties call for revisiting the target and including humanitarian aid and stabilization programs as part of defense and security. As Germany awaits the outcome of the federal elections in September of 2021, US

diplomats must be prepared to defend a concise definition of NATO's defense spending with the next ruling party and government coalition of Germany.

Teetering Relations: Recent US Approaches to Germany

US-German relations reached an all-time low during the last US Administration. This assessment of the relations is critical to providing an improved approach for the United States to remedy its relationship with its German counterparts, while remaining committed to US interests regarding Germany's contributions to NATO. Under the Trump Administration, criticism regarding Germany's defense budget, reached an aggressive turn. Though past U.S. presidents have criticized Germany's defense budget, the Trump Administration's position threatened longstanding U.S.-German relations. While our interests to pressure Germany to spend more on their defense budget remains constant, we must seek a better approach to our diplomatic engagement. The United States pays for over 30% of NATO's total budget, and remains the highest contributor with an annual contribution of over 3.5% of our GDP (Public Diplomacy Division, 3). No other nation has closely reached our proportional contributions to the alliance. In July of 2018, Former President Trump presented an ultimatum that NATO member states meet the defense spending target of 2 percent of GDP. If they fail to do so, Washington threatened to withdraw its full commitment to the alliance.

While our demands for this defense target spending was discussed as far back as G.W. Bush's administration, Trump's direct threat created a tense situation across the trans-Atlantic alliance. In a reversal of his threats, the current US administration has made clear its commitments to NATO. However, US diplomats must continue to engage with our allies so that they reach the 2% GDP goal by the target date of 2024, set through mutual agreement among NATO members in Wales, in 2014. In addition, Trump announced his intention to return 12,000 troops from Germany, over the contingencies related to Germany's defense spending (Emmot, et al. *Reuters*). However critical Germany's defense spending is to strengthen NATO's capacity, and reducing the US's financial burden, reducing military personnel and equipment prior to increasing financial contributions to replace US footprint on behalf of European allies, is a dangerous move that counters US security interests in the region. This policy recommendation encourages working with German diplomats to re-engage the mutual coordination between US military and

German military forces in Germany, following the current administration's reversal of Trump's plans.

Time Sensitive Challenges: Russian Aggression in the Crimea

Russian aggression on the borders of Eastern Ukraine and in the Crimea, reaffirms NATO must be prepared to deter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, a foundational concern for NATO. Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014 signaled a need for NATO to redistribute its focus from the Middle East, and back to Eastern Europe. Our deployment of NATO service members and military equipment in our eastern member states, sends a clear and strong message to Moscow that the US, and NATO are committed to defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe.

Recent events have accelerated the call for increasing spending. Since March of 2021, violence has increased between Ukraine and Russia. Our intelligence reports an estimated 15,000 Ukrainian casualties since the beginning of conflict in 2015. US officials received reports from the Ukrainian government that Russia deployed over 80,000 troops between the Eastern Ukrainian border, and Crimea. As a result, the United States has deployed an additional 500 personnel to Germany who will have a role in space, cybersecurity and electronic warfare specialization. While the United States stands with its German allies in condemning the deployment of Russian troops and cautioning for a draw down and de-escalation of tensions, the United States must call on Germany to heed the Russian threat as a test to NATO's capacity, and reimagine its financial commitments to defense spending. In 2014, Germany joined us in pledging to increase defense spending, and to boost political and practical support for Ukraine and East Europe, but Germany is falling short of reaching its target goal by the initial year set by NATO members. Hesitation from German leadership, and commitment without concrete result, poses a major risk to US's efforts to deter Russia through the Alliance.

In addition, following the Biden Administration's reversal to a nonnegotiable diplomatic stance with the Kremlin, the Administration is expected to pressure its NATO allies to stand firm against Russia and follow the US's considerations to impose sanctions on Russia, in response to its aggression in the Crimea. Such sanctions will require Germany to halt all commercial

dealings related to the Nord Stream 2.0 project. US Congressional legislation has called for sanctioning any entity involved in the pipeline project. Secretary Blinkin's May meeting with German Foreign Minister Maas, reaffirms US concerns over the Nord Stream Pipeline (US State Department). If the State Department moves forward with sanctions, Germany will be expected to comply with US demands or face economic sanctions for their dealing with Russia. The German Desk must be prepared to enforce the US's security concerns regarding Germany's dealings with Russia for natural gas, however there are some areas of opportunity for addressing the Nord Stream issue, which will be detailed below.

Approaching US Interests in NATO: Policy Recommendations

This section will look at the areas of opportunity for the United States to address the German financial deficit in NATO. US-German relations have mended significantly since the previous Administration, however the German Desk must account for pushback and hesitation from German leadership, who has become critical of the United States' capacity to lead NATO in the long term. For this reason, it is the responsibility of the German Desk to commit to long term solutions that prove the US's commitments to maintain a strong relationship that is consistent with US values and interests. The German Desk must consider opportunities for diplomatic communication to facilitate a plan to present negotiations before the NATO council to create a binding obligation to meet the target goal of 2% GDP spending. This pledge will create concrete incentives for allies to reach the target goal for defense spending, and will disperse membership accountability- a solution to signaling out Germany despite underwhelming contributions from other NATO members. The US can expect the support of its allies who've exceeded the 2% target as fair burden-sharing has long been an issue among all members, and not solely between the US and Germany (Pothier, 4) . Countries that do not meet this target goal by a specified amount of time, will face strategic consequences. In addition, the obligation will define what constitutes national defense spending as to prevent ambiguity that will enable nations to forgo their 2% GDP commitment (Pothier, 4). While no apparatus is established for the review of membership within the Treaty, the 2018 NATO summit affirmed the possibility of joint response to a material breach of the Treaty. Any member state who fails to "unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security" (preamble, North Atlantic Treaty), can technically be removed by a unanimous decision made by the North Atlantic

Council, and this standing may be used to apply to a failure for any state that consistently violates its financial commitments to the organization (Sari, *Just Security*). Though this may seem controversial to our European counterparts who disagree, the United States cannot continue to bear the brunt of financial and logistical responsibility, and must set the foundation for shared commitments. NATO allies must focus on maintaining the momentum of efforts to strengthen NATO's position in Europe, and to advance reforms to the organization's military apparatus. To address Russia's threats over Ukraine, US diplomats must be willing to engage a firm diplomatic approach to Germany that does not allow for compromising and avoidance of financial responsibility on behalf of our German counterparts. Increasing defense spending is critical to modernizing and updating Germany's lagging military equipment stockpile, training troops for new levels of security and military engagement such as cybersecurity, and protecting our Ukrainian allies.

With the time-sensitive crisis of Russian aggression at the Ukrainian border, prompt action is required. While NATO allies continue temporary training operations in Romania, North Macedonia, and Ukraine, Russia's aggression must be addressed via a full scale NATO upgrade of military capacity by increasing overall defense expenditure. In the question of the Nord Stream Pipeline, the United States must remain firm in preventing Russia's leverage over Eastern and Central Europe by having the advantage of using gas resources as a political tool. To prevent such disastrous security and diplomatic risks, the United States can offer to negotiate alternative sources of obtaining liquified natural gas. US-German representatives can discuss Germany's involvement in the Three Seas Initiative to reinforce Europe's energy security. With a commitment of about \$1 billion, EU states can have access to alternative forms of gas delivery that enable the EU to regulate the liberalization of gas markets, prevent supplier monopolies such as Gazprom, and build cross border pipelines and import facilities for LNG sourced from the United States and other countries (Fried, et.al, *Atlantic Council*). This US-backed strategic project will increase European consumers' access to seaborne cargoes of LNG from diverse suppliers, which will prevent Russian dependency and manipulation of the LNG market by Russian companies in exchange for political concessions.

It is the responsibility of the German Desk to reaffirm US commitments to maintaining a strong relationship with our long time ally. Calling upon our ally for support, the United States

can build stronger US-German relations by working to create stronger mandates for NATO to address security challenges in Europe, and abroad, through mutually respectful diplomacy.

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