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Rebuilding the Team: How to Get Allies to Do More in Defense of Common Interests

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ISSUE

If a future crisis requires that a force be sent to defend Middle East oil supplies, as happened in 1990, the responsibility and risk will again fall almost entirely upon the United States, even though wealthy U.S. allies are more dependent on the oil. Because only the United States currently maintains the capability to defend common interests most likely to be threatened, the burden of defense—in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere—now rests more heavily on American shoulders than it did during the Cold War. The review of U.S. defense strategy that will follow the upcoming presidential election provides a chance to begin rectifying this inequity. To do so, the United States will have to be willing to rely on its allies, and the allies will have to accept more responsibility and earn the confidence of the United States.

The United States and its allies currently have no strategic understanding that common interests should be defended jointly. Despite commonplace rhetoric about the need for “U.S.-led coalitions” to respond to international security crises, not to mention actual experiences in the Gulf War and in Bosnia, current U.S. defense strategy, plans, and preparations are essentially unilateral. At the same time, U.S. allies maintain forces more suitable for resisting invasion of their homelands than for projecting power outward. Consequently, we run the risk of weakening public support for maintaining and using America’s formidable military capabilities unless wealthy U.S. allies bear more of the burden.

For military, economic, and political reasons, U.S. strategy must make room for U.S. allies, and the allies

must step up to their responsibilities. The issue, in our view, is not *whether* this should be done but *how*.

THE BENEFITS OF HAVING ALLIES BY OUR SIDE

The United States and its NATO allies relied crucially on each other during the Cold War. The United States did not have sufficient forces to stop a Soviet offensive independently, and it naturally expected West Europeans to join in defending their own territory. Because coalition military action was imperative and expected, defense preparations were likewise multilateral, notably in NATO.

Today, in contrast, the principal American allies do not figure in the U.S. defense plan, even though they have economic resources on a par with those of the United States and an equal stake in strategically important regions, especially Eastern Europe and the greater Middle East. Why do we not rely on them as we once did?

One simple reason is the widely held belief that the United States can and therefore should maintain the means to protect its interests independently, whether or not others share those interests. In other words, if we *need not* depend on others, we *should not*. To be sure, we would ask our main allies to pitch in if common interests are threatened. But, the argument goes, we should maintain sufficient forces to succeed on our own, since we cannot be absolutely sure of even our closest friends at the moment of truth. And even if key allies marshalled the will, and some forces, to join in a military coalition, we cannot afford to risk the degradation in effectiveness that genuine multilateral operations might cause.

The problem with such reasoning is that it invites our rich friends who share our interests to take a free ride. Moreover, as long as we choose not to depend on allies, we will fail to make the joint preparations needed to ensure effective coalition operations.¹

What if the United States could gain confidence in the capability and intent of its allies to participate effectively in the defense of shared interests? In that case, depending on them more than we do would produce important benefits:

- *Greater equity:* The risks and costs of defense, in dollars or in casualties, would be shared more fairly.
- *Stronger political support:* There would be less danger that in some future crisis the Congress and public would decline to support American military action because of a lack of proportionate allied participation.
- *Better strategy:* The United States would be better able to leverage its military resources to protect its global interests and to respond to the wide range of crises that could crop up in the new international security environment.
- *Less risk:* If a major conflict proved to be more demanding than expected, the United States and its allies together would be able to muster more total forces and staying power than would the United States alone, barring a massive call-up of reserves, resumption of the draft, or other extraordinary measures.²
- *More economical:* The United States could free up resources to modernize its forces without weakening current defenses.

In sum, getting a greater allied contribution to the protection of common interests would enable the United States to afford more security. It should therefore be a key American objective.

We do not favor simply dismissing the argument for independence for the sake of fair burden-sharing. On the contrary, we suggest conditions that, if met, would give the United States confidence that allies *could and would fight effectively* in coalition operations with the United States, thus addressing the worries that underlie the urge for independence.

¹Specifically, the current plan of record, the *Bottom-Up Review* (BUR), makes no mention of contributions from NATO allies or Japan in either of the two major regional conflicts on which the U.S. defense program is based. It is understood, of course, that South Korea would have a major role in defending itself against a North Korean attack.

²It is all too easy to assume that future conflicts will resemble the Gulf War, as opposed to the drawn-out wars that have in fact been more common over the last 50 years or so.

We concentrate on the NATO allies because the near-term prospects are brighter with them than with Asian allies. Yet the principles that bear on the Europeans could apply to other allies as well; there is no fundamental reason why the United States should ask more of its wealthy Atlantic friends but not of its wealthy Pacific friends. Moreover, the example of integrating NATO allies into U.S. defense strategy might exert some healthy pressure on the other side of the world.

Our sights should be set not on token allied participation but on serious force contributions from key allies, commensurate with their interests and economic strength. Recognizing that a new military buildup by the European allies is politically infeasible, we constrain the possibilities to current allied gross defense efforts, which are roughly two-thirds of the U.S. defense budget and are of equal end strength. If the European allies can be induced to make better use of *existing* resources, they could furnish from one-third to one-half of all the forces needed to protect common interests, wherever they may be threatened—e.g., in Eastern Europe and in the greater Middle East—without increasing their defense spending or armies.

Of course, even with sizeable allied force contributions, there is a danger that effectiveness could suffer if unilateral preparations and operations are made multilateral. We must not sacrifice military performance at the altar of fair burden-sharing. So the effort to involve allies must include a strategy and preparations that take advantage of respective strengths and meld an effective force.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Our point of departure is to understand the reasons why the United States does *not* depend on its allies today:

1. There is no shared assessment of the new strategic situation nor acceptance of the principle that responsibility for security should be fairly distributed according to interests and economic means.
2. The United States and its allies have no binding obligations or mutual assurances to act in concert in most plausible scenarios in which shared interests might need to be defended. There is only a commitment (in Article 5 of the NATO treaty) to the common defense of allied territory, which is currently not threatened.
3. The United States has unilateral military superiority over any conceivable enemy in nearly all plausible conflict scenarios where important U.S. interests could be threatened. It is therefore not compelled to rely on others, as it was during the Cold War.
4. Because of their history—colonialism, world wars, and the threat of Soviet invasion—West Europeans

are psychologically wedded to the concept of security as territorial defense and are uncomfortable contemplating the projection of power to defend remote interests.³ Consequently, the allies, even in the aggregate, lack the ability to fight wars where they are most likely to occur: far from home. Their forces remain mostly suitable for border defense. The British have expeditionary forces, and the French have begun reorienting their posture toward power projection; but at present they could each furnish only about a single ground division, essentially what they sent to the Gulf War five years ago. The Germans and other NATO countries have even further to go.

5. U.S. defense planners would prefer not to divert U.S. lift and support assets to enable allies to make a major combat contribution, wanting instead to maximize the U.S. effort. And as long as U.S. military commanders are confident that they will have sufficient forces to fight, they will favor unilateral over messier multilateral operations.
6. Reflecting these conditions, there are no programs of coalition war-planning, common readiness standards, agreed command arrangements, or large integrated exercises that would build confidence that joint operations involving important allied contributions could be nearly as smooth and effective as U.S. unilateral action. Combined planning in NATO has begun to deal with peacekeeping within Europe, but not with the sort of demanding military challenges that drive force planning.
7. U.S. bureaucratic interests do not have an incentive to change the status quo: Diplomats do not want to push friendly governments to acquire controversial power projection capabilities; force planners do not want to weaken the case for sufficient U.S. force structure to defend American interests independently, especially with no guarantees that allies will be with the United States; and strategists view a multilateral approach as a potential drag on the further technological advancement of U.S. forces.
8. Inertia: Faced with more immediate problems, neither the United States nor its allies have confronted the problem.

A vicious circle is at work. The United States plans, and maintains sufficient forces, to defend common interests independently because it lacks confidence in even its closest allies' capabilities and intentions. These allies lack motivation to remedy their shortcomings, knowing that the United States can and evidently will protect common interests with or without them. Because the allies lack capabilities, the United States does not pursue the cooper-

³This is especially true of Germany, the largest NATO ally, as a consequence of its unique history of aggression, defeat, division, and vulnerability.

ative preparations that could raise confidence in allied intentions and in effective coalition military action.

COUNTING ON ALLIES

From this diagnosis, four basic conditions for relying on allies emerge. These conditions address the central problem for the United States: *confidence*—that the allies will send forces, that the forces will be capable, and that a U.S.-allied coalition will fight well.

1. Political understandings that the United States and allies will act together.
2. Enough of the right types of allied forces to make a military difference in a major, distant conflict (and thus also in smaller, nearer operations).
3. Combined military planning, which presupposes agreed security strategies.
4. Programs of cooperation, including agreed force goals, interoperability, readiness standards, training, coalition command arrangements, and exercises.

In the absence of new treaty obligations to act, which the United States could neither obtain nor offer, clear and durable *political understandings* are essential. These include the sharing of strategic perspectives by political leaders, consultations among senior officials on common international security strategies, and if possible, more formal exchanges about the intent to act if certain broadly defined common interests are threatened.

Combined military planning can buoy confidence further: The willingness of political leaders to authorize such planning implies a practical intent, or at least a presumption, to act; the planning itself would help convince senior officials and commanders that there is more at work than vague promises. Such planning would need to address who provides what types of forces at what stages in a campaign, how the forces would be integrated or coordinated, and how to adapt to operational uncertainties.

On the matter of *capabilities*, the United States would need to make known that hereafter it is counting on growing allied contributions. A role for at least the large NATO allies could be signaled in the upcoming U.S. defense review. Only when the allies are told that the United States will no longer compensate for their inadequate power projection capabilities will the Europeans make a determined effort to shift their focus from territorial defense toward a relevant posture.

At present, NATO allies have defense budgets totaling \$160 billion, and they field 50 divisions, 3,200 combat aircraft, and large naval forces. They have enough resources to perform power projection missions. Redirecting them toward the defense of shared interests, on the scale sug-

gested here, will take years. Even then, any allied requirement for U.S. lift and logistics and command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) support could come at the expense of providing that same support to U.S. combat forces. Therefore, *agreed force goals and cooperative programs* are needed to influence the specific capabilities allies acquire, to make U.S. and allied forces complementary, and to help ensure that coalition operations will be effective.

While none of these four conditions is sufficient in itself to permit the United States to count on allies to contribute effectively to a coalition military effort, the four in combination would be. Confidence would not soar overnight but would accumulate in the course of high-level conversations, joint planning, and concrete programs. Meanwhile, the United States would not make precipitous changes in its defense posture in light of expected allied contributions; but as dependable allied capabilities grow, the United States would be able to shift resources toward other needs.

To illustrate how confidence in the allies could be raised to such a point, consider the case of the Persian Gulf—as acute as any Western security concern. Because access to fossil fuel supplies is at least as vital to the Europeans as it is to the United States, the leaders of the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, along with the NATO Secretary General, might agree that a threat to Gulf security should trigger urgent consultations with a view toward common military action.⁴ They would state their intent to use NATO as the venue to form a coalition of the willing and able, neither excluding a role for other NATO allies nor creating a requirement for a consensus of all members.⁵ The leaders would task senior officials with framing joint security strategies and commanders with developing coalition military plans. These plans would surely reveal gaps in coalition capabilities, provided—and this is crucial—the United States said it expects allies to furnish a substantial share of the combat forces needed for a major Persian Gulf contingency. To close these gaps, the United States and its allies, at least the big ones, would need to agree upon force goals. The Europeans would then strive to meet these goals by accelerating the shift in their force postures from territorial

⁴We do not mean to suggest actual language here. No doubt it would be carefully qualified. But the meaning should be clear enough from the words to raise confidence, energize joint planning, and of course give adversaries pause.

⁵In advocating the use of NATO to prepare and mount U.S.–European coalition operations, we do not have in mind NATO as it functioned during the Cold War and, to a large extent, as it still functions to this day. While we cannot adequately treat the subject of NATO reform here, suffice it to say that we have in mind the use of NATO as a flexible vehicle by which willing and able allies, especially those with significant forces, can plan and coordinate combined military action. Recent NATO reforms, e.g., the adoption of the combined joint task force (CJTF) concept, are steps in the right direction, albeit too small, slow, and ambiguous, in our opinion.

defense to power projection. Preparations to execute multilateral plans would require U.S.–allied cooperative programs to improve the compatibility and readiness of coalition forces to deploy to the Persian Gulf. In the event of an actual crisis, the Congress and public would be unlikely to balk at a decision taken in NATO to form and send a U.S.–led coalition with large allied contingents.

MAKING MILITARY SENSE

If the confidence problem were overcome in a way such as this, what sort of coalition force might be possible? The case that follows is a two-step adaptation of the U.S. plan to prevail in two “nearly simultaneous” major regional conflicts (MRCs).⁶ First, while the current U.S. plan assumes conflicts in the Middle East (specifically, the Persian Gulf) and East Asia (Korea), we add Europe (specifically, Central Europe). Second, while the current plan assumes no allied contribution to any MRC, we call for a significant one *both* to Europe and the Persian Gulf.

At present, the Pentagon allocates a “building block” of forces for both the Persian Gulf and Korea: seven division-equivalents (including independent brigades) of Army and Marine forces, 11 fighter wings (including a Marine wing), and four or five carrier battle groups.

What additional forces should be allocated for a conflict in Europe? The BUR is silent on this issue, but NATO’s official plans call for projection forces for European security. This need was recognized when NATO created its concept of a “rapid reaction force” (RRF) in 1991. NATO currently specifies a requirement for four divisions of projection forces and assumes these forces will be available to perform local European operations even during a major war in the Persian Gulf.

The need for projection capabilities for the European theater will grow as NATO enlarges eastward (even as the need for border defense forces continues to shrink). A reasonable force-sizing standard is for a capability similar to the U.S. MRC postures for the Persian Gulf and Korea. This posture could, for example, help defend Poland against a Russian attack. It would not, of course, be intended solely for this contingency. Rather, it would be designed for a full spectrum of operations, including peace missions, crisis interventions, and lesser regional conflicts.

At the risk of complicating matters, it should be noted that a force posture for Europe would require somewhat more divisions and wings than the U.S. BUR “building block.” The reason is that U.S. units are typically bigger

⁶We ask the reader to suspend judgment, for the moment, about whether such dependence on specific MRCs is wise in defense planning. We rely on it here as a device to show how the willingness and ability of allies to bear greater responsibility for defense might be folded into U.S. plans, which are currently MRC-based.

and better armed than their West European counterparts. If the goal is comparable capability, the NATO-Europe posture should be, say, nine divisions and 15 fighter wings and corresponding naval assets. This posture would be about double the size of the current four-division NATO standard but no bigger than the current RRF, which includes 10 divisions and 600 combat aircraft. But, while the current RRF is viewed as a pool from which limited assets (up to four divisions) can be drawn at any time, our concept calls for the entire posture being capable of projecting power.

What countries would furnish these forces? Because the United States currently plans to use its Europe-based forces to meet Persian Gulf requirements, if need be, logically the European allies would have to provide the entire NATO-Europe force. But such an approach is badly flawed: It would leave the United States carrying the entire burden in the more dangerous Persian Gulf; it would diminish the American role in Europe; and it would omit the United States from the defense of NATO's new Central European members. So we favor the concept of an integrated coalition approach, organized in NATO, for *both* Europe and the Persian Gulf. In Europe, the United States would be responsible for providing, say, one-third of NATO's forces, and the allies would be responsible for the other two-thirds. In the Persian Gulf, U.S. forces would compose two-thirds of the total, and the forces of NATO allies the other third.

As a consequence, U.S. Europe-based forces—two Army divisions and three USAF fighter wings—would be committed firmly to European missions and would no longer be planned for use in the Persian Gulf. To compensate for this U.S. commitment, three allied divisions and five fighter wings would be assigned Persian Gulf missions and be made ready to deploy there in concert with the United States. The allies would become responsible for furnishing their own lift and logistic support needed to help defend the Persian Gulf, as well as to carry out their NATO-Europe obligation.

In sum, the new allocation would be as shown in the table.

In the Persian Gulf, the United States would have the leading role, but it would no longer be alone. In Europe, the allies would provide the bulk of the forces; but the

New Force Allocations

	Europe		Persian Gulf	
	Divisions	Wings	Divisions	Wings
United States	2	3	5	8
Allies	6	10	3	5

United States would commit enough forces to solidify its continuing role in Europe, its support for the new democracies, and its irreplaceable contribution to deterrence.

Building integrated defense plans, of course, requires more than simply allocating enough U.S. and allied forces to meet total requirements. Coalition planning, guided by sound military strategy, will be needed to ensure that combined military operations can be carried out effectively. In Europe, NATO's command structure and multinational corps can handle these new missions, especially since the defense of new East European members would be covered under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.

In the Persian Gulf, a different approach is needed. Because the United States will still provide two-thirds of the forces, its Central Command would be responsible for leading combined operations, as in the Persian Gulf War of 1991, albeit with larger contributions by allied forces than now envisioned. NATO's role would be that of developing the necessary plans and programs to ensure that European forces are prepared for Persian Gulf missions and can be deployed there promptly. Most likely the European countries making major contributions will be those whose forces are best prepared for major operations at long distances: e.g., Britain, France, and Germany. If so, the Persian Gulf will be defended essentially by a small coalition of willing and able powers. But they will be drawing on their NATO experience and on NATO assets to get the job done, and the door to effective participation by other NATO allies would be left ajar.

Of course, a sensible distribution of roles and missions must be crafted for both theaters, based on the capabilities of each nation as well as fair burden-sharing. For example, the United States should remain responsible for providing integrated command and control though it would share the product fully. A sound war plan might call for U.S. forces to go in first, perhaps with a few crack European forces alongside them. European forces could be the next to deploy, configured for sustained defense. Heavy American forces from the continental United States could deploy last, thereby providing the combat power needed for a counteroffensive. In this way, the goals of burden-sharing and military success could both be realized.

The specific ideas put forth here are meant only as illustrations of how coalition planning can be achieved. Moreover, we have discussed only MRC-scale operations. The larger point is that if combined operations by U.S. and allied forces are to work regardless of the crisis or the scale of the effort needed, they must be prepared in advance through a diligent coalition effort aimed at handling a welter of complex military details. This kind of coalition

effort is not easily mounted, but NATO's history during the Cold War shows that it is achievable—provided the participating nations work together, in peacetime as well as wartime.

IMPLEMENTATION

At present, on paper, our NATO allies can provide about four divisions—less than half the total allied requirement we suggest of six divisions for Europe and three for the Persian Gulf. In reality, a host of constraints (e.g., poor mobility and logistics) prevent even these forces from deploying. Although they could do so within their current defense spending, the allies will not spontaneously reorient their force postures to this extent. The United States will need to initiate efforts, in NATO and bilaterally, aimed at forging a consensus to pursue such changes. A revised NATO strategic concept must be written, force goals must be set, programming guidance must be adopted, and contingency plans must be created. An effort of this magnitude sounds daunting. Yet, it is no more so than the challenges met by NATO during the Cold War, such as through the conventional Long-Term Defense Program and the nuclear missile deployment of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To impart political momentum to such reform, the U.S. administration will need to signal that it attaches a high priority to forging a modern peacetime military coalition. But the effort cannot end with presidential letters and a NATO communiqué. Purposeful follow-through is needed by U.S. diplomats in Europe and U.S. military leaders, both in NATO and bilaterally. The best place to pursue this initiative is NATO's force planning process, which in any case needs to be reinvigorated for new-era missions, and in U.S. regular contacts, training, and exercises with allied forces. Perhaps not all allies will react well at first, but several of them already recognize that their own interests are best served by strengthening their forces in these ways. France's recent decisions to reform national military strategy and forces for the new era suggest that it is the leading candidate to respond favorably to these American proposals and to challenge its fellow Europeans. Britain may be wary of new commitments because of its preoccupation with Northern Ireland, but it will be otherwise sympathetic. Germany and others will likely follow suit.

The United States can set an example by launching the process of preparing U.S. European Command forces for new European missions, especially in East Central Europe. This can be done, for example, by allocating the modest sums that will be needed for new infrastructure, prepositioning, and exercises to implement the commitment to new members.

The United States can also work with key allies to refashion several current NATO activities into vehicles for strengthening NATO's forces. These activities could include:

- proposing that reform of NATO's command structure be expanded to include creation of a new command charged with building the combined forces needed for power projection;
- making clear that a true "European defense identity" will be taken seriously only when the allies prepare forces capable of the new missions;
- urging adoption of a plan to ensure that the projection forces needed for new Article 5 missions in East Central Europe are assembled;
- giving strategic purpose to NATO's "Long-Term Study" of alliance renewal by calling for the creation of a joint capability to defend common interests wherever they are threatened;
- using the biennial NATO posture review to embrace the economizing measures that will be needed—e.g., reducing unnecessary allied border defense forces—to fund these initiatives without increased spending;
- establishing joint readiness standards and holding allies accountable for meeting them.

At the same time, U.S. forces that defend the Persian Gulf will need to work much more closely with allies in planning what will become genuine coalition missions in that theater. This will entail harmonized programming and readiness so that another Persian Gulf war could be fought effectively by the United States in concert with its allies, sharing fairly in the responsibilities and risks. This collaboration should also be fostered by and focused in NATO.

GETTING THE ALLIES TO PLAY

Some Europeans may view the status quo as advantageous, in that the United States is maintaining sufficient forces on its own to defend common interests. But the status quo cannot last, and the United States should make sure the allies know this. The coming NATO admission of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and possibly others will in any case require NATO to plan and program the projection force needed to defend them. The United States should commit itself to participate in that force, provided the allies do their share in Europe and also make up for the reassignment of U.S. forces now planned for the Persian Gulf.

This will set a demanding goal for the Europeans, more than doubling their current power projection capa-

bility. But strategic conditions in the new era require this shift anyway, and by starting it now they can strengthen NATO and the U.S. commitment to Europe, while also improving the security of oil supplies. If the United States is clear in setting the direction, the allies should respond positively, for it is in their interest to do so.

CONCLUSION

Over the long haul, the burdens facing U.S. forces could be greatly reduced by returning to the practice of working with, and if need be fighting side by side with, key friends. Improved allied capabilities would enlarge the total pool of forces for European and Persian Gulf mis-

sions. The effect would be to give NATO the ability to defend its members' shared interests wherever they might be threatened—a clear and worthy purpose for the alliance in the new era. It would enable American forces to handle lesser but likely demands while still being ready for big regional wars. The United States would also be more able to pursue the modernization of its forces without fear that current readiness will be weakened. Together, the United States and its partners would be better able to provide security in the growing circle of prosperous democracies and in the face of an uncertain future world. The benefits are well worth the effort of trying to gain them.

This issue paper is an outgrowth of RAND research on NATO's future defense policy. For examples, see the following: David Gompert and Richard Kugler, "Free Rider Redux," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1995; Ron Asmus, Richard Kugler, and Steve Larrabee, "What Will NATO Enlargement Cost?" *Survival*, Autumn 1996; Richard Kugler, *U.S.—West European Cooperation in Out-of-Area Military Operations: Problems and Prospects*, RAND, MR-349-USDP, 1994; Jed Peters and Howard Deshong, *Out of Area or Out of Reach? European Military Support for Operations in Southwest Asia*, RAND, MR-629-OSD, 1995. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy through research and analysis. Results of specific studies are documented in other RAND publications and in professional journal articles and books. To obtain information about RAND studies or to order documents, contact Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>).

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