Section II: Alliances
U.S. Policy Toward European Defense

James Thomson, RAND

The new U.S. administration should make an early determination of its position on the creation of European defense structures—decision processes and military commands—and the adaptation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to accommodate them. The United States should be firmly behind European defense efforts and should avoid imposing obstacles to them. But, the United States has good reason to be cautious about adapting NATO to accommodate these structures until stronger military capabilities are really developed. If the Europeans make real progress on capabilities, Washington should be ready to adapt NATO to the new European structures.

Background

There is considerable reason to be skeptical about the current European debate on the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). European nations have a history of big talk and small action on defense. Despite rhetoric about a European “pillar” for defense, Europe—with the notable exception of the United Kingdom and France—has consistently spent less on defense than the United States, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP, and has thus fielded forces with less technological capability and lower readiness.

This mattered less during the Cold War than it does now. America’s NATO allies had the bulk of the ground forces that would have defended Europe. In a virtual division of labor, the Europeans provided most of the soldiers while the United States emphasized technology—command and control, intelligence, tactical air power, long-range strike capabilities, plus, of course, nuclear weapons.

Now, the difference between U.S. and European efforts matters a lot. The Cold War left the United States with far more capabilities that are useful in protecting the mutual interests of the United States and Europeans. The most important challenges are on Europe’s periphery or well beyond, emphasizing the need for rapid deployment over great distances. In many other situations, such as in Kosovo, either America’s or Europe’s vital interests might not be directly engaged. In those cases it will be desirable to have the option to use force in ways
that minimize casualties, as in the NATO air attacks on Serbia in 1999. In other words, precision strike technologies could enable military operations in cases when it would be politically impossible otherwise. Such precision strike capabilities are chiefly the domain of the United States today.

The Kosovo air campaign illustrated the vast gulf between U.S. and European capabilities. The United States conducted two-thirds of the air sorties and almost all of the precision-strike missions. Had a ground invasion proved necessary, it would likely have been organized with U.S. command and control and with U.S. ground forces making up a large part of the invasion spearhead.

For the first time, European politicians had to face the reality that European defense is essentially toothless. They chafed at and were politically embarrassed by what was perceived as a lack of consultations by the United States over the campaign’s conduct. Countries whose military contributions were weak felt cut out of the decision-making process.

The result has been a major shift in the European attitude toward ESDP. This has had three components. The first was a shift in rhetoric from political structures toward military capabilities. In the 1990s, the European debate on defense largely featured discussions on organization, which many Americans found misplaced given European military weakness. This has changed. The Blue Ribbon Weizsaecker Commission on the state of the German military argued strongly for fundamental reform of military structure and an increase in defense resources. The European Union (EU) has put forward a “headline goal” of a capability to deploy within 60 days a force of 60,000 soldiers, plus air and sea capabilities, and to sustain it for a year in contingencies consistent with the “Petersberg” missions. Because these missions include peacemaking and not just peacekeeping, this implies that the force must be combat capable. The sustainability goal means that the total reservoir of forces should be roughly three times larger, which makes the headline goals a serious challenge for Europe.

The second component of ESDP occurred with a rapid integration of Europe’s defense companies, underscored by the creation of EADS, the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Company. Now, two major companies occupy an economic space that once had an order of magnitude more. This consolidation should help to reduce inefficiencies in defense research and development, a part of a large efficiency problem that bedevils the European defense effort.

The third component was the British government’s decision to take the lead in promoting an EU role in defense and security policy, rather than oppose such a role. This decision makes it possible to eliminate some of the complications of the “overlapping and interlocking” institutions responsible for European security.
Thus the EU is incorporating the Western European Union (WEU) as its military arm. Former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana has become simultaneously the high representative of the EU for security policy, the secretary general of the Council of Ministries of the EU, and the Secretary General of the WEU. A military committee has been set up and a command structure will be needed for the force associated with the EU’s headline goals.

The U.S. Dilemma

As challenging as they are, the headline goals are only a start in the direction of what is needed from the U.S. point of view. Washington should hope that Europe would seek to get as much military capability for the dollar or euro as the United States does. Given current levels of European defense spending, that implies a military force roughly 60 percent as powerful as that of the United States. As was apparent in Kosovo, however, Europe’s force is significantly weaker. The headline goals address only two of the critical weaknesses of the European militaries—deployability and sustainability.

Were Europe to create a military force 60 percent as powerful as that of the United States, it would be good news. The United States needs Europe as a strong military partner, for at least four reasons. First, the United States already has too many global responsibilities to handle alone—for example, security of Persian Gulf oil, stability in East Asia and the Balkans, and protection against the proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons. If the United States had to act militarily to fulfill these responsibilities, it would have a hard time responding effectively in multiple simultaneous cases. If another conflict had broken out during last year’s campaign against Serbia, for example, U.S. air capabilities would have been strained.

Second, the United States shares common strategic interests with Europe, especially on Europe’s periphery. The United States and Europe may need to act together to protect these interests. Third, domestic politics demands partners. Unless Americans sense a direct threat to a truly vital U.S. national interest, they are unlikely to support unilateral decisions to commit U.S. forces to combat. A coalition is politically essential.

Finally, a weak military partner can be worse than none at all. U.S. forces may have to operate suboptimally in coalitions with allies that possess backward technology. For example, according to Defense Secretary William Cohen, during the Kosovo conflict, the United States often had to communicate in the clear because some allies lacked interoperable secure voice communication. This sort
of problem will become more severe if Europe continues to lag the United States in military technology.

An effective security partnership between the United States and Europe also requires organizations and processes for command and control of coalition forces and for planning and programming future defense capabilities. Up to now, these organizations and processes have existed in NATO. It is arguable whether the NATO mechanisms for planning future defense capabilities are effective, but the organs for command and control and for military combat support have proven crucial in the Balkans and were even important in the Gulf War, although NATO itself was not directly involved.

Therein lies the U.S. policy dilemma. The drive for a stronger European defense includes the creation of European defense structures—that is, organizations and processes. These could be antithetical to an effective NATO, which has functioned well as a consequence of U.S. leadership. Because the United States is the dominant power in an alliance of 19 sovereign nations, leadership is relatively easy to exercise. Many officials and analysts worry that independent European defense structures would lead to a bilateral U.S.–European NATO in which the United States must bargain with a unified European authority rather than lead 18 other independent nations.

The sorts of structural changes that some Europeans have advocated have included the integration of separable multilateral European commands into the NATO military structure; the replacement of U.S. officers by European officers in senior NATO positions; and a European caucus—effectively a European seat at the table in the North Atlantic Council and in other political and military bodies. Such a NATO structure would be more cumbersome and thus weaker because of the time and effort needed to forge a European consensus and the inability of the United States to exercise decisive leadership. It is clearly more efficient if the United States—after consultations, of course—essentially tells everybody what it wants them to do.

Many Americans, especially in the national security bureaucracy, worry that the weakening of NATO would be no accident, but rather a consequence of deliberate policy. The French antipathy toward NATO is long standing and arguably some French see European defense structures as an alternative to NATO. In addition, many Europeans understandably worry about U.S. reliability in future conflicts on Europe’s doorstep. The domestic U.S. debates over the Balkans do not instill confidence among Europeans that the United States will always be there to help. Hence, from a European perspective, independent European structures and capabilities would simply be a wise insurance policy.
The United States has been wary of independent European structures and has continually stressed the importance of building European defenses within NATO—meaning within NATO as currently conceived. The United States has been especially fearful of the possible worst case—a NATO modified to accommodate the drive for independent European mechanisms, but without any significant improvement in European defense capabilities. Given both past European performance and the nature of the political challenges European nations must confront to create a stronger defense, this is a real danger.

As a result, U.S. reactions to European calls for a greater defense effort after the Kosovo crisis were muted at best, even sour. Early statements tended to put conditions on U.S. support: The effort should be undertaken in NATO, Washington suggested, through the NATO Defense Capabilities Initiative that was launched at the 1999 NATO Summit. The United States further argued that the Europeans should avoid the “three Ds”—duplication, decoupling, and discrimination of non-EU members of NATO—notably Turkey.

More recently, U.S. statements have generally been positive, as officials have realized that negativity could prove counterproductive, even providing some European leaders an excuse not to make a serious effort. This is a tactical move, however, and some U.S. officials continue to complain about the “unnecessary duplication” of capabilities, which again leads Europeans to wonder whether U.S. rhetoric in support of European efforts should be taken seriously. These officials mean that Europe should not duplicate expensive capabilities that the United States could provide for them through NATO—although they do not think U.S. forces should do the same, were NATO forces to develop a capability the United States lacked. In short, some officials continue to see a U.S.-dominated alliance, not a true partnership.

The European Challenge

Creating a future European defense capability roughly commensurate with the money spent is a daunting task. The reasons for European military weakness are deeply rooted, and three roots in particular will have to be addressed.

First, defense monies are poorly allocated in most European nations. There are too many soldiers and not enough professionalism and technology. The armed forces need significant restructuring, a fact that is now widely recognized throughout European defense ministries, including in Germany, which itself has major structural problems. What was needed in the Cold War—lots of heavy ground force units to defend the eastern border of West Germany—is no longer a necessity.
Recognition of the problem is the first step toward solution, to be sure. But the task is huge. New equipment must be developed and bought, new support systems created, bases closed, conscription ended, and military compensation adjusted to attract and retain high-quality professionals. There are numerous countervailing forces that will hinder, if not block, this transformation: institutional cultures; vested interests within government, military, and the private sector; localities fearful of the effects of closed bases; and so forth. The U.S. post–Cold War transformation, as extensive as it was, nevertheless was nowhere near as sweeping as what Europe faces. But in the U.S. transformation has nonetheless been difficult and is still less than complete.

A common European complaint is that the United States has impeded the technological development of European forces through its export control policy. This complaint certainly has merit. Successive U.S. administrations have not been able to overcome internal resistance to permitting unfettered European access to state-of-the-art U.S. technology. The fact that stronger allies would be good for the United States cannot overcome fears of technology leaks. Perhaps the recent developments within Europe toward the rationalization of defense industries will help, as Europe should become more of a technological equal to the United States. This could, in turn, create greater opportunities for transatlantic industry partnerships and technology sharing.

The second European challenge is that not enough money is being spent on defense by some key countries. Perhaps from a long-term perspective, Europe as a whole is spending a reasonable amount, especially when the European spending on the “soft” instruments of security—such as humanitarian aid and investment credits—are taken into account. But there are significant imbalances within Europe. The UK and France each spend roughly 3 percent of their GDP on defense, while the rest of the EU spends slightly more than half that percentage. Italy spends a mere 1.9 percent of its GDP on defense, and Germany, only 1.2 percent. These kinds of imbalances would be a cause of political friction if Europe truly moves toward an ESDP.

In addition, the defense transformation that is needed cannot be accomplished without more money. Just as a firm facing restructuring must invest up front to get hoped-for returns later, so must military forces. New equipment must be purchased and old capabilities retired, and both are costly activities. The low-spending countries face the biggest transformation challenges.

Low defense spending is built into European national budgets. Any significant increases will have to be paid for elsewhere—by cuts in other government activities, or by increased debt or revenues. Even during this current period of
economic growth, none of that seems likely. Germany will be the bellwether. There, fiscal priorities are on tax and welfare reforms. Before the Weizsaecker Commission report, the German government planned more reductions in the defense budget. Now, Germany plans a small increase in 2001 and hopes to see financial benefits from efficiencies in subsequent years. This is not a particularly strong reaction to the transformation need.

Third, European defense monies are spent inefficiently. There are 15 separate military establishments in the EU, each with its own military services, headquarters, training, support, and research and development programs; this has led to overlap and duplication in capabilities, and as well as to vital interoperability problems. Washington is quite familiar with the problem of interoperability, given the scope of the U.S. defense establishment and the strong role of each of the four military services in training, equipping, and maintaining the forces. The creation of joint capabilities in the United States is always a challenge, but the European problem is multiplied at least 15 times, when one considers that each of the 15 EU countries also has its own military branches and may have domestic interoperability problems as well. Moreover, the United States has a set of centralized organizations and processes in the Department of Defense to address the inefficiency problem; Europe does not. Europe would be lucky to achieve a level of defense inefficiency as low as that which exists in the United States.

In the long run, Europe needs a central defense authority to make a serious dent in the inefficiency problem. This implies a unified European defense program, planned and administered centrally, even if implemented by national defense establishments. Some sort of enforcement mechanism, such as exists in the stability pact in the European Monetary Union, will be needed to ensure that central plans are actually implemented. The national defense capabilities will need to be tied together operationally by combined multinational European commands.

At this point in the deepening of the European Union, such central authorities seem a distant vision at best. But smaller steps could be taken now that would start the process. Existing and planned assets could be pooled, so as to be procured and operated along the lines of the NATO airborne warning and control system (AWACS) program. In December 1999, the EU heads of state at Helsinki endorsed an old WEU idea for a European transport command. Two British policymakers, John Roper and Timothy Garden, have suggested that a Eurofighter headquarters operate that new tactical air capability. Others have proposed creating common support capacities. A collection of steps like this may ultimately add up to something approximating a central authority.
But, it will be a missed opportunity if Europe does not soon create a central defense planning structure. Given that European policymakers now accept the need for defense transformation, it would be a shame if each nation undertook transformation on its own rather than by working together. Rampant inefficiency would simply be perpetuated.

One can at least hypothesize that there is a lot of money (or its equivalent in capability) that could be saved via a rational plan for Europe’s future defense capabilities. Here the U.S. wariness about independent European structures is paradoxical. Europe will not be able to build needed capabilities without them, and the notion that the rationalization of European defense should happen in NATO is not realistic. Rationalization—the reduction of multinational inefficiency—means some subordination of national decisions to the larger, multinational good: Some countries give up some missions to bolster other capabilities. The United States would not do that, but it is at least conceivable that EU nations would. The NATO defense planning process has no real clout, as the United States has long bent the process to reflect U.S. national defense planning and others have followed suit. Something new—with real political influence over national programs—will have to be developed in the EU for there to be at least a chance for defense rationalization.

Conclusions

The United States should firmly support European efforts to build a stronger defense capability, including the creation of intra-Europe defense structures, because these will be necessary for Europe to build a stronger defense capability. The United States should stop complaining about duplication and let the Europeans stand on their own two feet, if they can. A militarily strong and competent Europe would relieve the United States of some burdens, ensure that the United States and Europe can act together militarily, and help to quell growing American domestic opposition to U.S.-dominated coalition operations, especially when U.S. vital interests are not engaged.

A more united and militarily stronger Europe could also be a more assertive and difficult partner. But the basic foundations of a strong European–U.S. security partnership are likely to override difficulties. Western interests are broadly aligned; Europe and the United States share the same basic principles. A few difficulties would be worth it.

The danger for the United States is that Europe could become a more united and assertive partner without adding seriously to its military capabilities. But a politically strong but militarily weak Europe will not be assertive unless the
United States agrees to alter the NATO structures that weaken the U.S. ability to lead the alliance. Thus, the United States should clearly separate its attitudes toward developing European defense structures and adapting NATO structures. Washington should be firmly in favor of the former and wary of the latter. If Europe becomes militarily strong, the United States should be happy to alter NATO to accommodate it, thus creating a true twin pillar alliance. If Europe does not become strong, then the United States should not agree to adjustments. Washington cannot afford to bet on the outcome.

How the Europeans handle their headline goals will be a watershed. Even if taken seriously, these will be difficult if not impossible to meet by 2003, because some new capabilities will have to be created. If Washington’s European allies admit this and lay out a sensible and achievable plan to move ahead, it will be good news. Nevertheless, it will be a long time before the United States knows whether European defense capabilities are improving. Some leading indicators, however, might include increased defense spending in Germany and other low-spending nations. The creation of true multinational planning mechanisms with real political clout would be another indicator. Steps toward combined military assets would be yet a third.

The political desire among Europeans to declare victory will be tough to resist, but U.S. defense analysts will be able to tell the difference between true progress and rhetoric. Washington will be able to see whether the Kosovo experience has truly reversed the previous European preference for communiqués over capabilities. If indicators show that real progress has occurred, the United States can be more relaxed about NATO adaptation.
At its April 1999 Washington Summit, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reaffirmed its pledge to keep the “door open” to new members, and nine Central European countries have applied to join.1 Allied leaders further pledged that they would review the applicants’ progress to meet membership conditions at the next NATO summit, to be held no later than 2002. To be sure, the 1999 summit communiqué did hedge its bets—noting, for example, that decisions about NATO enlargement would be taken “as NATO determines that the inclusion of [further] nations would serve the overall political and strategic interests of the Alliance and that the inclusion would enhance overall European security and stability in light of the overall political and security situation in Europe.”2 Nevertheless, expectations are high throughout Central Europe that, in 2002, the alliance will invite one or more countries to join.

The new U.S. president inaugurated next January does not have to decide soon whether to promote further NATO enlargement in 2002 or to choose which applicant countries to support for membership. These decisions can be deferred, the former in all likelihood until late in 2001 and the latter until the few months before the (notional) NATO summit, although the sooner the United States makes its views known, the sooner the alliance can begin working toward a consensus. But soon after inauguration, the president will have to act in three related areas:

First, he will need to indicate publicly that he supports the principle of further NATO enlargement—reiterating pledges made in 2000 by both major party presidential candidates and party platforms3—but he can withhold, if he chooses, any specific commitment regarding 2002. The new president must be

---

1 The nine applicants are Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
2 See Paragraph 7 of the April 24, 1999, NATO Summit communiqué, relevant portions of which are included in this essay’s appendix.
prepared to make this reiteration of the principle of enlargement by the time of
his first press conference or meeting with a European leader. Failure to do so
would be interpreted throughout Europe as a backing away from the “open
door” pledge and would have a negative effect on a wide range of U.S. NATO
policies. The new president can choose that course, but, if so, he must be
prepared for widespread questioning of U.S. credibility in Europe. Second, he
will need to reaffirm the overall U.S. commitment to European security and
willingness to continue exercising leadership within the alliance—an enduring
requirement at the beginning of every new administration, closely watched by all
European countries, despite the end of the Cold War. Finally, he will have to
begin laying the groundwork for his later decisions about whether to promote
NATO enlargement in 2002 and, if so, which countries to support.

This last step will be necessary so he can preserve the option for a 2002
enlargement decision, for a simple but compelling reason: To produce a
successful outcome, this decision cannot be seen on its own, but only in relation
to a number of other policies and actions, some of which will take significant
time and effort to bring to fruition. This was also true before the NATO decision
at its 1997 Madrid summit to invite Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to
join. NATO enlargement is a package of policies, and that will be even more true
the next time around, when overall allied support for further enlargement is, as
of now, less robust.

The Package of Efforts

Several key steps must be taken soon in the new administration in order to
preserve the president’s options for further NATO enlargement in 2002. These
include the development of an overall U.S. strategic policy toward European
security that demonstrates the place Europe occupies within U.S. global security
perspectives. If allies perceive that the United States is reducing the degree of its
commitment, then later decisions about NATO enlargement will be deeply
affected; as in the last round, the alliance’s decision to take in new members is
first and foremost about the strength and credibility of the overall—and
enduring—U.S. strategic commitment to European security. It goes without
saying, of course, that the national missile defense (NMD) issue must be
managed in a way that does not cause decisive damage to the NATO alliance or
to U.S. credibility within it.

Another step involves basic decisions about the future of U.S. engagement in the
Balkans, including the U.S. role in the Bosnia Stabilization Force (SFOR) and the
Kosovo Peace Implementation Force (KFOR). What the new president decides here—or lets continue without fresh decisions—will be an important signal of the depth and character of U.S. strategic engagement on the continent, as well as of specific attitudes regarding the importance of the Balkans, whose general region contains five of the nine countries aspiring to NATO membership. Of course, decisions to reduce U.S. involvement in collective NATO actions in the Balkans, unless they are the outgrowth of common allied agreement, would raise questions among allies about U.S. staying power and would thus effect deliberations about further NATO enlargement. This point took on major significance, after key advisers to presidential candidate George W. Bush announced that a Bush administration would leave the responsibility for NATO peacekeeping to the Europeans. That could have a serious, negative effect on allied willingness to continue with NATO enlargement. By the same token, allies interested in NATO enlargement toward the southeast should be encouraged to make diligent progress with the European Union’s Stability Pact for Southeast Europe and other efforts to reduce the still very considerable risks of instability in the region—concerns that continue to apply in some measure to both Romania and Bulgaria, and with stronger reason to Macedonia and Albania.

U.S. and allied efforts to foster progress among the three most recent members in meeting expectations about their performance, including military reform, constitute a third key action. What Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are judged to have done by 2002 will help to condition opinion, especially in the U.S. Senate, about NATO’s taking in new members at that time.

Parallel efforts should also be taken to promote both NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PFP) and progress within individual states aspiring to join NATO. The former is important not only to help prepare aspirant countries to join NATO, but also to help cushion the domestic political effect of rejection at the next allied summit—for those countries not invited at that time—by continuing to develop close engagement of these countries with NATO, short of actual membership. The latter effort is important to help ensure that any countries selected to join NATO in 2002, on whatever criteria, are in fact moving toward meeting objective conditions for being effective allies.

The next administration should reaffirm the Baltic Charter and work to develop further its practical aspects. Even if the new president is determined to seek invitations for all three Baltic states to join NATO in 2002, this effort will both preserve his option and signal the importance of these countries to the United States; if he is not so inclined, promoting the Baltic Charter must be part of efforts to help disappointed applicants politically.
Another key step the next president should take is to develop policies toward Russia designed, to the extent possible, to reduce its opposition—in practice, if not in rhetoric—to further NATO enlargement. This effort, especially important if the new U.S. president wants to preserve his option to support NATO membership invitations in 2002 for one or more of the Baltic states, needs to be initiated rapidly to have time to succeed—if success is, indeed, possible. These policies can include continued efforts to build NATO–Russia cooperation, along the lines of those policies undertaken in the 1990s with mixed results. Of course, developing a basic, long-range set of policies toward Russia will be a matter of high priority early in the next administration even without considering the option of future NATO enlargement.

The next administration should also initiate discussions with the European Union (EU) about that body’s pace, timing, and direction of enlargement. The EU has long rejected the creation of any correspondence between EU and NATO enlargement decisions. In terms of reassuring countries not selected for NATO membership, however, prospects for joining the EU make great political sense; for example, such an arrangement was decided, without NATO–EU consultation, in the EU’s decision to put Estonia on the fast-track to EU membership. Given the degree of expectations in Central Europe about engagement in Euro-Atlantic institutions, the next administration should not be shy about pressing this case.

Once the administration has decided on its strategy, it should engage in early consultation and coordination with NATO allies regarding this entire package, and it should also seek early discussions on Capitol Hill, and especially with the Senate and its principal committees—Foreign Relations and Armed Services—about the administration’s overall policy toward NATO, the Balkans, and enlargement. These discussions should include steps being taken in regard to reform efforts—military and otherwise—in the three new member states and in individual aspirant countries.

**Deciding on the Invitees**

Presuming that the next president does not elect to abandon the U.S. and NATO pledge of the “open door,” the administration should begin, in 2001, its own internal deliberations about the number of countries to be given serious consideration for invitation to membership at a 2002 NATO summit—as well as whether that summit should take place early or late in the year, a decision to be influenced in part by the pace of other efforts discussed above.

It is already clear that the United States and allied states have developed individual sets of criteria for judging whether aspirant states would be acceptable
as NATO members. These criteria remain subjective and can be viewed as gates to be cleared rather than positive indicators for admission: few if any allied states would be prepared to create a “check list” that would lead to “automatic” membership. In addition, decisions about enlargement within the alliance will be more difficult in 2002 for several reasons. First, the two key countries bordering on Germany—Poland and the Czech Republic—have already been admitted, thus fulfilling Berlin’s aspiration to “surround itself” with NATO allies. Second, NATO has shown that, as a matter of principle, it is prepared to project stability into Central Europe. Third, the most important aspirant countries, geopolitically in relation to the former Soviet Union and especially Russia, have already been admitted. Fourth, there will be careful analysis of the practical results of the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to determine whether enlarging NATO increases its capabilities or at least “holds harmless” existing capabilities. By the same token, decreased pressure within NATO to take in any particular aspirant state or, for some allies, any at all, will lead to intensified scrutiny about the readiness of countries to assume the burdens of NATO membership.

Fifth, no current aspirant country is likely to generate the amount of domestic political support in the United States that was developed for Poland, and from which Hungary and the Czech Republic also benefited. Sixth, the Kosovo conflict dramatized the potential obligations that NATO would take on if it admitted countries from that region, as opposed to the virtually “free good” in terms of such obligations represented by the first three aspirants. Seventh, the added sensitivity in some allied countries, especially following the Kosovo conflict and the election of Vladimir Putin, to Russian objections to NATO enlargement, especially regarding the Baltic states; this is contrasted with doubts in some allied countries that a next round of NATO enlargement could be conducted that patently sidelined all three Baltic states. Eighth, the U.S. Senate, and especially the Senate Armed Services Committee, is likely to play a more skeptical role even before the president makes his own decisions. Other allied states will also question the pace and extent of NATO enlargement—as well as the selection of individual candidates—in terms of NATO’s capacity to remain effective militarily, with all that that concept applies, including the functioning of the integrated military commands. Ninth, the departure of Slobodan Milosevic from the Yugoslav Federation should reduce risks of conflict in that region of Europe and, with it, some allies’ support for extending formal NATO commitments in that direction. And finally, it will generally be more difficult to justify within the alliance, in terms of a coherent and consistent set of criteria, virtually any combination of states to be selected for entry. Poland and the Czech Republic—and to a lesser degree, Hungary—were the “obvious” choices in 1997. Only
Slovenia and perhaps Slovakia at this point would appear to be “obvious,” and neither has yet fully demonstrated that it meets the list of implicit criteria set by various allies.

Furthermore, the entire process of NATO enlargement has not yet adequately addressed a more basic question: What is the strategic rationale for taking in new members, especially particular countries? There has been a general proposition that Central European countries have a right—and the West a duty to honor that right—to become full members of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Such a proposition is implicit in the philosophy and values of the West, the basis on which it fought the Cold War, and the documents creating the great Western institutions, including NATO and the EU. For NATO, the primary arguments for membership involve questions of location (is the country next to Germany, on the direct route to Russia?), reform (has it undertaken political, military, and economic efforts?), relations with neighbors (has the country renounced territorial claims?), and whether a country is prepared to meet requirements of actually being an ally. Beyond those four issues, the most compelling added argument was that, for Central European countries to proceed most productively with reforming their politics, economics, and other institutions, they needed to have a strong sense of confidence that they would not again become objects rather than subjects of European politics, battlegrounds for great-power conflict. This is the heart of the current NATO and U.S. commitment.

NATO has also adopted the general principle that any member state of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) can, in time, become a NATO ally, provided it is ready and willing to shoulder the responsibilities of NATO membership. Implicitly, this could also include Russia.

But beyond these two general propositions, buttressed by the other arguments advanced for the admission of particular countries, NATO has not developed a convincing rationale with regard to the directions and how far it should enlarge at any particular point and whether, in practice as opposed to theory, there is any limit to membership. These issues already relate to the timing of the next enlargement decisions in regard to assuring that NATO will still be able to function as an effective alliance, as well as to judgments that must be made at any point about the effect of these enlargement decisions on external countries, especially Russia. Whatever the theory—or commitments—about not honoring Russian “red lines” with regard to new NATO allies, including any state formerly a part of the Soviet Union, several of the allies will be acutely sensitive to potential responses in Moscow.
Although specific NATO enlargement decisions—the question of “who”—may in fact be made on an ad hoc basis, there will be increased interest, including in parliaments that are being asked to make commitments, as to the nature of the commitments being undertaken, in practice, and the overall strategic rationale for choices made. These points need to be developed during the period before the 2002 summit.

The Range of Alternatives

As in 1997, there is little doubt that the United States will have the most influence within the alliance about which countries will be invited to join, whether in 2002 or later. This is particularly true since Germany has gained its preferred candidates, France appears to be less enthusiastic than it was before for Romania (although that could change), and extending membership into either the Baltics or the Balkans would require clear U.S. engagement—the former because of the need for U.S. leadership in dealing with Russian objections, and the latter because commitments that come with membership could be called upon by one or more Balkan states, and that, for the foreseeable future, would require major U.S. participation in any military, or even political, response.

The following are possible choices for the next administration and the alliance:

1. *No Invitations.* This is theoretically possible; indeed, the criteria set out in Paragraph 7 of the Washington Summit communiqué provide that latitude. Yet, except in extraordinary circumstances, it would be difficult for the alliance to reject all nine applications without falling prey to charges of lack of purpose and loss of credibility. Trying to justify delay—even with attempts to create some form of added engagement with NATO between Partnership for Peace and full membership—is unlikely to satisfy any aspirant country; moreover, PFP is designed to fill all the space short of full membership.

2. *The ‘Big Bang.’* This alternative, subscribed to in general terms by all nine aspirant countries in Vilnius in May 2000, is designed in part to enable each of the nine to reinforce the case for all of them; to gain greater attention for enlargement, as such, by demonstrating solidarity, including in efforts to undertake necessary internal reforms; and, in the process, to avoid some sort of diplomatic “beggar thy neighbor” policy. Supporters of the Big Bang argue that it would (1) facilitate creating a coalition of allied supporters—no “log rolling” or regional pressure-groups would be needed; (2) provide Russia certainty and

---

4 See appendix.
predictability, rather than with a crawling approach that could provoke a new reaction each time NATO took a fresh enlargement decision (implicitly, some Big Bang supporters admit, the message would be “these nine and no farther,” and Ukraine would also be implicitly excluded from NATO membership at least for many years); (3) satisfy all aspirants and avoid the implication of new lines of division, at least in the middle of the continent, that would create Central European haves versus have-nots; (4) ensure no weakening of democratic processes—or recrudescence of tensions with neighbors—in countries disappointed for a second time; and (5) permit both NATO command structures and military reform programs to rationalize their efforts.

Arguments for the Big Bang, however, have to be measured against skepticism that it could garner widespread support within the alliance. For one thing, several allies would be unwilling to take such a risk with regard to Russian reactions. It will be difficult enough for them to test the waters with a single Baltic state; to flood NATO membership could, in their judgment, simply drive Russia out of the game of cooperation and back into isolation and obduracy. For another thing, proponents of a NATO that must be seen as militarily strong and effective at every point in its evolution would have deep misgivings about such an abrupt taking in of new members, some clearly problematical in military terms and also political and economic terms. In all likelihood, the U.S. military would object to the uncertainties of potentially having to defend such a group of countries, however remote that contingency might be. And allied countries that are less enthusiastic about any further enlargement would find the Big Bang simply out of bounds—if, that is, NATO were to continue being considered a serious military alliance, as is a basic premise of all allies’ defense strategies. The Big Bang, therefore, is unlikely to attract sufficient support within the alliance to be a viable alternative in 2002.

3. Single Nation. Most—perhaps all—of the allies could coalesce around admitting Slovenia, assuming that it continues on its current pace of reforms. It was nearly admitted in 1997, and it has the virtues of providing a land bridge to NATO member Hungary, of not needing NATO’s Article V protection from any foreseeable direction, of not being a likely significant drain on allied resources, of being economically quite solid, and of being virtually invisible to Russia. As a token to demonstrate that the “open door” is still viable, Slovenia would be an obvious choice; but this might be so obvious as not to satisfy those in Central Europe concerned about the credibility of the NATO “open door” pledge.

4. Two Countries. In this scenario, a second country could be added. By most allies’ reckoning, this would be Slovakia. It had been one of the original Visegrad states, but it failed to qualify for NATO membership at the Madrid Summit
because of policies pursued by former President Vladimir Meciar. With progress in democratic development, Slovakia is generally considered to have resumed its place on the “fast track,” in part because of its geography and connection to the Czech Republic. To qualify in the future, however, Slovakia will need to keep on the path of internal political and economic reform; it will also need to take steps, well beyond what it has done so far, in military reform and adaptation to NATO standards.

Another “second country” possibility would be Austria, especially because it borders on Germany. Austria has not yet applied to join, however; there is little enthusiasm for its candidacy within NATO; and some time may still have to pass in Austria’s internal political development before it would find unanimous support among allies for NATO membership.

5. Two Countries Plus ’n’ Countries? Neither Slovenia nor Slovakia should be controversial within the alliance. But if NATO were to invite any third country—or more—which should be chosen? To most allies, Albania and Macedonia are regarded as not ready to be included within NATO; both are widely seen as “problematical” in the sense that each has special difficulties related to the 1999 Kosovo conflict and its aftermath. Ironically, many allies are loath to include as formal allies countries that might actually have need of an Article V commitment—and, indeed, both Albania and Macedonia were, in effect, given temporary coverage against aggression, analogous to that provided for under the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article V, during the Kosovo conflict.

This analysis demonstrates a key element in considerations about NATO’s future: the distinction between the political virtues of membership and the military requirements of the Article V guarantee: they are clearly not the same; indeed, NATO countries, individually or collectively, can undertake a strategic commitment to a country without its being a formal alliance member.

Romania and Bulgaria are both pushing hard to be included in the next round of NATO enlargement, and both have their champions within the alliance, especially in southern Europe. How far each will have progressed by 2002 toward meeting implicit NATO standards, in terms of military reform, economic progress, solidity of democratic institutions, and enduring, positive relations with neighbors can only be judged nearer that year’s projected NATO summit. Also at issue will be whether NATO’s current members—and in particular the United States—will want to see the alliance enlarged by as many as four countries in 2002.

At the same time, a number of NATO allies are pressing for the inclusion of at least one Baltic state, to show that NATO can enlarge in that direction and that it
is not being dissuaded by the Russian “red line.” Lithuania is most often cited, if only one Baltic state were to be invited to join NATO at this point, in large part because it is contiguous to NATO territory—Poland—and has a relatively small Russian minority. By contrast, Latvia has a large Russian minority, while Estonia, considerably separated from NATO territory, is, as noted earlier, on the fast track to EU membership, which many allies would see—though they rarely say so—as “compensation” for not being invited to join NATO.

In terms of the internal alliance politics of NATO enlargement, including one or more of the Baltic states is likely to be most controversial, because of Russian objections. At the same time, creating a consensus within the alliance for including states from either the Balkan or the Baltic region may require choosing at least one of each—an example of political log-rolling, if not strategic coherence. None of these decisions, however, needs to be made before 2002.

Conclusion

As the United States is leader of the alliance—in fact and in expectation—what the new administration decides to do about NATO enlargement in 2002 will be highly influential and likely decisive within the alliance. Most important for the administration’s first year, however, will be to keep the president’s options open. To do this means reaffirming NATO’s basic commitment on enlargement, beginning a process for considering what to do at a 2002 NATO summit, and, in some ways most important, beginning soon to take the steps needed so that further NATO enlargement will contribute to the alliance’s capabilities, its continued political cohesion, advancing the goal of including Central European countries fully within the West, and buttressing overall European security. Thus, as was true before the 1997 Madrid Summit, the process leading to further NATO enlargement, and the character of the corpus of NATO activities, will be critical.

Appendix

*Paragraph 7 of the April 24, 1999, NATO Summit Communiqué (relevant parts)*

We reaffirm today our commitment to the openness of the Alliance under Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty and in accordance with Paragraph 8 of the Madrid Summit Declaration. We pledge that NATO will continue to welcome new members in a position to further the principles of the Treaty and contribute to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area. This is part of an evolutionary process that takes into account political and security developments in the whole
of Europe. . . . The three new members will not be the last. . . . The Alliance expects to extend further invitations in coming years to nations willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, and as NATO determines that the inclusion of these nations would serve the overall political and strategic interests of the Alliance and that the inclusion would enhance overall European security and stability. To give substance to this commitment, NATO will maintain an active relationship with those nations that have expressed an interest in NATO membership as well as those who may wish to seek membership in the future. Those nations that have expressed an interest in becoming NATO members will remain under active consideration for future membership. No European democratic country whose admission would fulfill the objectives of the Treaty will be excluded from consideration, regardless of its geographic location, each being considered on its own merits. All states have the inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security. Furthermore, in order to enhance overall security and stability in Europe, further steps in the ongoing enlargement process of the Alliance should balance the security concerns of all Allies. We welcome the aspirations of the nine countries currently interested in joining the Alliance. Accordingly, we are ready to provide advice, assistance[,] and practical support. To this end, we approve today a Membership Action Plan. . . . We direct that NATO Foreign Ministers keep the enlargement process, including the implementation of the Membership Action Plan, under continual review and report to us. We will review the process at our next Summit meeting[,] which will be held no later than 2002.
U.S. Alliance Relations in the Global Era

David C. Gompert, RAND

If the United States is to have effective alliances in the future, they must be strategically purposeful and politically equitable. Of its two principal alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the U.S.–Japan defense relationship, neither one currently measures well along these yardsticks. This essay examines alternative approaches to these alliances, screening the options first according to strategic value and then according to fairness. The result is a recommendation to recast both alliances, the better to meet these standards of effectiveness.

Strong Friendships, Shaky Alliances

Ten years after the end of the Cold War that spawned them, U.S. alliances with Western Europe and Japan are intact even though the bloc that opposed them is long gone. There are three reasons for this surprising durability: (1) the cohesiveness of democratic ideals spanning the north Atlantic and north Pacific; (2) shared stakes in an increasingly integrated global economy; and (3) particular security problems—namely, North Korea and Yugoslavia—that have made each alliance at least situationally useful.

Because the first two conditions are likely to persist, so too should friendly relations between the United States and both Western Europe and Japan, without which alliances obviously would be out of the question. Of course, other futures cannot be excluded: Economic rivalry and a more uppity European Union (EU) might fray or sever U.S.–European cooperation. Japan might become ambitious and unreliable. The United States might shelve its 50-year commitment to multilateralism for lack of the spur provided by a global enemy. If seen to be making its own rules, while no longer willing to sacrifice disproportionately to keep its alliances together, a unilateralist United States could reinforce any European or Japanese tendency to set an independent if not contrary course.1

---

More likely, though, the forces of economic and political affinity will prevail: the former because the economies of the United States, EU, and Japan are gradually merging; the latter because their shared values are becoming even sturdier, as democracy flourishes globally and as their citizens have access to common information, from CNN to MTV. Although U.S.–EU and U.S.–Japan relations could become more competitive in some senses, they will stay friendly in the most basic sense.

While it has thus far helped to keep the two alliances going, friendship alone does not assure effective military pacts in perpetuity. After all, these pacts were erected mainly because Japan and Western Europe needed protection, not merely because these allies were democratic or cooperative. Common values and economic interests are insufficient to energize defense collaboration and instill a sense of shared commitment to international security. There must also be a compelling strategic purpose, but neither alliance has found or at least declared one.

So far, this lack of an unambiguous, agreed strategic purpose has not undone either alliance: Peacekeeping in the Balkans has kept NATO usefully busy, just as North Korea has kept the United States and Japan focused. Yet, nasty as they are, the Balkans and North Korea are limited, presumably transitory problems. Although more flare-ups between Serbs and Albanians can be expected, Greater Serbia has been defeated and deflated. Take away Slobodan Milosevic and the Balkans should steadily recover from his savage policies. Similarly, North Korea is a decrepit dictatorship whose only leverage is a threat—chilling though it is—to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) if attacked. Although its demise might not be imminent, its days, like its options, are numbered. Both these situations warrant attention and could require allied action, but they cannot be lasting raisons d’être for the alliances between the United States and the world’s other two leading economic, democratic powers.

**Strategically Pointless, or Just Rudderless?**

Artful communiqué-drafting, jovial photo ops, and puffy references to shared ideals cannot hide the fact that neither NATO nor the U.S.–Japan defense relationship has set forth a compelling strategic purpose. Such justifications as “stability” in Europe and East Asia, while unexceptionable, do not translate into strategies or impel serious joint defense efforts. The official and intellectual stewards of each alliance argue with conviction that theirs is needed in order to
keep the United States engaged in East Asia or in Europe, but they are vague or evasive when asked why that engagement will be imperative in the future.

The thought of alliances in search of strategic rationales is disturbing. Although public support for them is solid among all members, this could wane if the costs grow and disagreements over directions erupt. The public feels it needs them, but either it does not really know why or it knows but cannot say:

- Is the alliance with Japan intended to check the rise of China? If not, then what is its purpose? It is said that the U.S.–Japan alliance obviates the need for Japanese remilitarization. But this implies that the alliance satisfies some profoundly important need that Japan would otherwise be impelled to meet on its own at great expense. This begs the question: What would motivate Japanese remilitarization? The answer is surely China, but neither Japan nor the United States chooses to say so.

- Is NATO to become the maker and keeper of peace in Europe and adjacent regions, such as Africa and the Middle East? If so, why not say it? If not, then why continue it? Is it a hedge against a resurgent Russia? If so, the motivation will continue to shrink as it becomes ever clearer that Russia will not, because it cannot, resurge. If NATO’s purpose is merely to police the southern Balkans, it follows that NATO will decline in importance as the EU takes more responsibility there, as both the United States and Europeans say it should.

Unless and until their purposes are clarified, these military alliances are on borrowed time, even as shared democratic values and economic interests sustain amicable U.S.–EU and U.S.–Japan ties. Paradoxically, they are vulnerable not only to crises, which could fracture them, but also to the absence of crises, which could reveal a lack of utility.

Of course, strategic rationales for these alliances must address U.S.—and European and Japanese—security needs, interests, and responsibilities in the new, global era. These include the security of world energy supplies; countering the proliferation of WMD; preventing aggression in key regions; stopping genocide; safeguarding global flows of goods, capital, and information; and dissuading rising powers from confrontational behavior. With these security challenges in mind, several interesting strategic ideas can be imagined for U.S. alliances.

---

\footnote{2 Talmudic scholars would be hard-pressed to find such a rationale in the latest official documentation of NATO’s “strategic concept.”}
The Alternatives—First Pass

Option 1: A More Equal, More Global U.S.–European Partnership. NATO could become a true Atlantic partnership, able and willing—though not obligated—to protect common interests and to fulfill common responsibilities wherever needed. This could include keeping peace in the Balkans, responding to humanitarian catastrophes in Africa, guaranteeing Arab–Israeli peace agreements, maintaining security in the Persian Gulf region, and fighting terrorism worldwide. For the Europeans to accept a stronger role alongside the United States everywhere except in East Asia and, of course, the Americas, the United States would be obliged to treat Europeans as partners instead of followers. The United States would then be able to devote more resources and attention to East Asia, especially to what looms as the greatest challenge of the new era: China. The increasingly robust U.S.–European partnership might, in time, even contribute directly to discouraging China from a provocative path.

Option 2: A U.S.–European Division of Labor. The United States could shift the main responsibility for keeping peace in Europe—but only there—to European shoulders, thus freeing Washington to deal with challenges elsewhere, including the Middle East and East Asia. This arrangement would respond to the post-Kosovo intention of Europeans to reduce their dependence on the United States for security on their own continent. Rather than a partnership, NATO would become a mechanism to manage a division of labor between the EU and the United States, as well as an insurance policy for Europe should unforeseen circumstances require renewed U.S. involvement there. At the same time, a more muscular U.S. presence in East Asia would make it unnecessary for Japan to take greater responsibility for regional security.

Option 3: Rebalanced Regional Partnerships. Both the EU and Japan could accept more responsibility within the existing alliances for security in Europe and East Asia, respectively. The United States would continue to be engaged in both regions while remaining the security guarantor of Middle East peace and world petroleum supplies. The rationale for this alternative is that the United States is a global power and the EU and Japan are, at most, regional ones. Although Japan has less of an appetite than the EU for a larger security role, the recent expansion of its supporting role in regional contingencies suggests that more regional responsibility-sharing on the part of the Japanese is possible within the strict framework of the defense relationship with the United States.

Option 4: Worldwide U.S. Leadership. Finally, the United States could reassert its primacy in both alliances and in all regions where serious security problems
exist, especially the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe. The rationale would be that U.S. military and technological superiority is growing and that being the planet’s superpower brings unique responsibilities and prerogatives. U.S. “unipolarists” would see an added payoff in discouraging the rise of any other power—be it China, the EU, or Japan. Proponents of a multipolar world—China, India, Russia, and France—would be frustrated but unable or unwilling to alter the situation. An anti-U.S. grouping would be unlikely to coalesce because its would-be members could not afford to discard the security and economic benefits of U.S. ties.  

Although purposeful, these four alternatives are not necessarily all equitable. Therefore, some might not be able to win and sustain political support. In particular, the American public might not be satisfied that the other great democratic powers, having enjoyed the benefits of U.S. protection for so long, are bearing responsibilities commensurate with their economic means and their own security interests.

**Farewell to Free-Riding?**

The United States was willing to bear disproportionate burdens and risks in its alliances when its very way of life was threatened and its allies could not protect themselves. That willingness is seeping away because the conditions that once justified it no longer exist. Increasingly, if the distribution of responsibilities within an alliance does not reflect the respective interests and capacities of the parties, that alliance will become contentious, ineffective, and fragile. Whereas the decline in U.S. willingness to sacrifice disproportionately has thus far been gradual, it could go into a nose-dive in the event of a crisis that costs the United States more dearly than its allies, especially in lives.

Out of habit, or because they are friends, the awesome capacities of the EU and Japan are generally underappreciated. In today’s world, power—the modern, useful kind—is concentrated in the United States, the EU, and Japan. Neither sagging Russia, with its eleven time zones, nor ascending China and India, with their teeming populations, can match the technological and economic strength of the leading democracies. Precisely because of their political and economic freedoms, the United States, Europe, and Japan are superior at creating and using information technology, the main source of power in the new era. Their human and financial capital put them in a league of their own.

---

3 This explains why China and Russia have not formed an anti-U.S. coalition, despite predictions that they would based on classical balance-of-power reasoning.
Although far behind the United States, Europeans collectively have the world’s second most capable military establishment. (Japan could easily field strong forces within a few years of a decision to do so.) Along with the United States, the EU and Japan manage the world economy; their trade and investments give them great leverage in world politics; and, of course, they are blessed with powerful friends—one in particular—and weak enemies.

Why, then, do these two other centers of power play marginal roles in world security and comparatively modest roles in their alliances with the United States? Why do Europe and Japan lack the U.S. global perspective, when their interests are just as global? And why is it that the two alliances have essentially the same political characteristics they did back when Europe and Japan were vitally dependent on U.S. protection: hierarchies under U.S. leadership; forces under U.S. command; lop-sided distributions of responsibilities, burdens, and risks; a psychology of dependence?

To a large extent, the situation has remained the same because the Europeans and Japanese are content to have it this way. Free-riding is a hard habit to kick. It is also rational, at least in the short term. As long as the United States is prepared to defend common interests and international security where the dangers are greatest—Korea, the Taiwan Straits, the Persian Gulf—without significant allied help, there is scant incentive for those allies to help. Japan has grown used to, if not dependent on, concentrating its resources and policies on furthering its economic position. Europeans, while expressing interest in a world role, are consumed with consolidating prosperity and unity at home.

Of the two, the Europeans are better prepared and more inclined than Japan to take on larger roles in their own region, the world, and their alliance with the United States. There is a growing resolve among Europeans to develop a defense component to their evolving union. The appointment of a director for “common foreign and security policy” and the decision of one after another European country to develop modern deployable forces suggest that a corner has been turned. Still, the Europeans appear far more willing to take responsibility to put out nearby brushfires than to intervene forcibly in more distant and dangerous regions. Consequently, the average American will continue to spend twice as much as the average European on defense, and U.S. forces will become more exposed to WMD than will those of Europe.

4 The German and French defense ministers have both used the fire-fighting image to justify the need for a European Security and Defense Policy.
In Japan’s case, important third countries—notably, Korea, Australia, and China—do not want it to be given, much less to take, significant security responsibilities. The fact that Japan is not part of multilateral security or political structures in Asia, as Germany is in Europe (as a member of NATO, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE), makes it harder for its neighbors to trust Japan with power. It is ironic, not to say unfair, that Japan’s contribution to Asian insecurity sixty years ago allows it to minimize its contribution to Asian security today, but that is the case now and is likely to remain so for years to come. Even if Japanese nationalist sentiment grows, it is more likely to manifest itself in symbols—harmless, if haunting, allusions to the “divine nation”—than in an actual choice to reduce dependence on U.S. power.

**Does the United States Want Followers or Partners?**

If its allies are hooked on U.S. power, the United States plays the role of enabler, in the psychiatric sense—a role it rather likes. Being, or at least claiming to be, the “indispensable nation” provides self-affirmation and instant gratification for speech-making officials and their audiences in Washington.

Yet, it is not entirely irrational for the United States to play a nearly exclusive role of security provider in the world’s danger zones, for it helps ensure unrivaled influence. In the Middle East, for instance, the United States may be the “Great Satan” because of its power and role, but it also has the most clout—and the fattest contracts. Even in the regions where its two main alliances are centered, leadership brings the United States benefits along with burdens and risks. In East Asia, being crucial to regional equilibrium gives the United States leverage not only with Japan but also with China. In Europe, its ability to react decisively to crises, while EU members are groping for a unified position, gives the United States both an edge in shaping outcomes—such as the Dayton Accords—and a reminder to Europeans that they cannot do without their large friend.

As Europeans have remarked, and as Japanese may think, the United States wants partners when it comes to heavy lifting, but followers when it comes to calling the shots. Already, the United States is getting a reputation in Europe for not wanting to relinquish a position of regional leadership that the EU naturally envisions for itself. The United States has been so resistant to restructuring NATO as a partnership that Washington has become a more effective, if inadvertent, agent for EU-based defense cooperation than has any European capital.
Although the United States is fond of running its alliances, the status quo is anomalous and unstable. It is no longer possible to dismiss as isolationist or unilateralist the growing mainstream sentiment in the United States that allies can and should do more. Polls consistently indicate that U.S. citizens do not share the itch for predominance that many of their statesmen and strategists have.

This common-sense desire for others to pitch in is particularly evident when the United States is asked to support interventions when no vital U.S. interests are involved. Notwithstanding unilateralist temptations and unipolar-ish rhetoric, the hard reality is that the public is willing to back U.S. intervention only if allies participate. Realizing this, the U.S. government is showing more interest, not less, in capable, interoperable, military coalitions.

There is an asymmetry between Europe and East Asia in this regard. In Europe, there are no foreseeable threats to vital U.S. interests; therefore, it is nearly unthinkable that the United States would use force in Europe without the allies contributing substantially. In East Asia, however, the United States faces greater threats to important interests and is ready to intervene alone if need be. In the near term, the presence of U.S. troops near a hostile, WMD-toting (if moribund) North Korea assures that the United States will not look to offload its responsibility. In the longer term, the rise of Beijing could pose challenges to regional stability and U.S. interests to which Washington would have to respond irrespective of Tokyo’s stance. For this reason, patience with Europeans is running out faster than patience with Japan, even though the latter does far less.

Apart from U.S. impatience, the current distribution of responsibility and authority within NATO is unstable because it is incompatible with the vision most Europeans have of the EU. After all, how can the EU not have the leading role in providing for European security? Therefore, if NATO remains U.S.-led, the EU is bound to replace it at the center-stage of European defense. Conversely, if NATO is to remain vital, the United States must be willing to make it a U.S.–EU partnership.

**Alternatives—Second Pass**

The condition that its alliances must be more equitable rules out the alternative of the United States continuing to play leading roles in both Europe and East Asia (Option 4), with the disproportionate burdens, risks, and prerogatives those roles entail. The necessary increase in U.S. defense spending and the implied interventionist policy would not enjoy public support.
At the same time, the United States is in a weak position to demand substantially more of Japan. It knows that other friends in East Asia would be aghast at the thought of Japan inheriting U.S. security duties in the region. Because of China, it cannot credibly threaten to leave East Asia if the Japanese do not accept more responsibility. Moreover, encouraging China’s integration and discouraging its use of power would be made much harder by should the United States offload its responsibilities to a stronger Japan. Therefore, rebalancing both NATO and the U.S.–Japan alliance (Option 3) is also not desirable, at least not now.

Thus, applying both the strategic and fairness tests, two alternatives survive: Leave Europe to the EU and turn greater U.S. attention to Asia, or make NATO a more global, more equal partnership. In both cases, the United States would be able to devote greater attention to East Asia, especially China. Does this imply that Japan will remain a free-rider in any case? In essence, yes. Nevertheless, it might be cajoled—again, the United States is in no position to make demands—into doing more in the interest of forging a better overall strategy vis-à-vis China. The thrust of a reinvigorated, somewhat rebalanced U.S.–Japan alliance would be not against China but toward it—urging China into a constructive role in Asia and the world, but making clear that the United States and Japan, together, will oppose Chinese belligerence.

As for NATO, the choice between the two equitable alternatives is a profoundly important and ultimately stark one: Either NATO becomes a partnership in and beyond Europe, or the United States and EU adopt a division of labor and go their separate, if complementary, ways. Clearly, NATO would atrophy in the latter case. Strategically and politically, a more equal, more ambitious NATO is better—fairer and more purposeful—than a division of labor, especially for the United States. However, the division of labor is easier and thus more likely, for two reasons: It would not require the United States to accept Europe as an actual partner, and Europe could limit its responsibilities to its own relatively safe region. Therefore, it would require a strong initiative to ensure a lastingly robust, fair, and relevant NATO. Such an initiative is worth taking.

**Conclusion**

If the United States had more responsible allies, it would have more effective alliances. If it had more effective alliances, it would be able to achieve greater security at reduced cost and risk. The price it would have to pay to gain genuine partners is a certain loss of influence, pride, and freedom of action. The EU is more ready than Japan to accept greater responsibilities—and the world is more
ready for the former than the latter. Both can do much more, and over time they must; when they do, this will strengthen, not weaken, their alliances with the United States.