A Bumpy Road on Burden Sharing: NATO and Ukraine in 2024

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It is hard to overstate how important a Ukrainian victory—or, at the very least, a Russian loss—is for U.S. and Western interests, broadly defined. Yet it is also hard to overstate how important the issue of allied spending on defense and security (or lack thereof) is to Washington policymakers, some of whom now question why the United States—rather than Europe—must continue supporting Ukraine.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) turns 75 in 2024, and the allies will meet in the summer in Washington, D.C., to mark the occasion. A key question on many observers’ minds is, How will NATO manage what is arguably one of the biggest crises in European security in the alliance’s history—the Russian war against Ukraine? The answer to that question will, for many, inform perceptions of the utility and purpose of the alliance for both current and emerging threats to the Euro-Atlantic region. Of course, crystal balls are inherently foggy; rather than predict a specific answer, it is far better to think about what factors are likely to inform such allied decisions at NATO’s 75th anniversary summit.

First of all, despite the fact that the war in Ukraine is affecting all NATO members, Ukraine itself is not a NATO member state. This is a point of frustration for several central and eastern European countries in particular, many of which waged an intense but ultimately unsuccessful diplomatic campaign for Ukraine to be invited to join the alliance in the run-up to the 2023 NATO Vilnius summit. As the logic went, inviting Ukraine to join NATO would be a way to force a cessation of hostilities, as many observers believe that Putin’s Russia does not want to want to wage war against NATO itself. The counterargument to Ukrainian NATO membership was that it would have immediately committed NATO and its member states to a major war with Russia. A half measure was instead agreed at Vilnius; among other things, Ukraine was promised membership in the future, as conditions allow, but without all the strings normally attached to the membership accession processes. But the bottom line remains that Ukraine is not a NATO ally.

As a consequence, NATO’s responses to the Ukraine crisis are primarily inwardly focused. One major area of work addresses preparing the alliance to deter and defend against a Russian attack on NATO territories (among other threats) through a series of reorganized war plans. Another key area focuses on encouraging members to spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defense programs. And still another addresses reexamining the NATO defense industrial
base after shortfalls in basic areas like ammunition have become apparent. As for Ukraine, NATO will continue to aid the war-torn country through humanitarian assistance, nonlethal aid, and capacity-building measures. Allies will continue providing both lethal and nonlethal aid, assuming their domestic politics allow for it.³

As for domestic politics, therein lies the rub. It is hard to overstate how important a Ukrainian victory—or, at the very least, a Russian loss—is for U.S. and Western interests, broadly defined. Yet it is also hard to overstate how important the issue of allied spending on defense and security (or lack thereof) is to Washington policymakers, some of whom now question why the United States—rather than Europe—must continue supporting Ukraine.⁴

Concerns about “burden sharing” are as old as the alliance itself. The need for Europe to spend more on defense has been routinely expressed across U.S. administrations for decades. Prior to departing the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued to the allies that if they did not spend more on defense, future presidents would have a hard time making the case to continue investing in NATO.⁵ At the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023, U.S. senator Ashley Tillis argued that burden sharing is the most critical issue before the alliance today.⁶ Yet, as of 2022, only seven European NATO states had spent 2 percent or more of their GDP on defense.⁷ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the world is where it is: the United States is frustrated that Europe does not put its money where its mouth is, and Europe is frustrated with being repeatedly browbeaten over the subject and with a U.S. presidential contender who, if elected, might attempt to pull the United States out of NATO altogether.⁸

The debate and related concerns about defense spending have been—and are—grounded in real concerns about what it takes to meaningfully defend allied territory and interests, especially as the alliance faces a Russian bear with a growing geopolitical appetite. But the problem with evaluating burden sharing against defense spending is that it turns what should be a strategic-level discussion among allies about what they can and should do to meet shared challenges into a transactional, nickel-and-dime issue of cost sharing. Because the value of NATO is being reduced to a discussion over dollars and euros, the broader strategic utility of the NATO alliance for U.S. interests is being lost. And Ukraine now hangs in the balance.

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