Debates about equitable burden sharing in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are not new. Practically every US president to date has asked European members to increase their own defense expenditures, thus increasing their contribution to NATO. Although the Europeans always voiced their agreement, action hardly ever followed. Now, US President Donald Trump has taken the debate to a different level. His administration insists vehemently that all European NATO members should spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense and put forward an appropriate plan to implement this. In the event that members do not comply with this – legitimate – demand for 2 percent, there is a danger that the US will reduce its commitment to Europe, with serious consequences for European security.

Germany’s Central Role in NATO

Not only does Germany have a vital interest in maintaining NATO and the strategic alliance with the US. It is also centrally important in the debate on burden sharing. The current discussion of this subject in Germany underestimates not only the extent of these defense policy tasks and the Europeans’ military dependence on the US but also Germany’s role in NATO and the high expectations its allies have of it.

Responding to the Russian annexation of Crimea, NATO already decided in 2014 to renew its original focus on the Alliance’s territorial defense, while maintaining its capability for international crisis management beyond NATO territory. This reorientation has involved a major effort, especially for NATO’s European members, and it will take years to complete. Most European armed forces were in dire condition, due to chronic underfunding. All NATO members have now committed to work toward the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, of which 20 percent is to be used for modernizing and expanding their armed forces.

The return to NATO’s territorial defense role corresponds to Germany’s interest in promoting a peaceful and stable European order. Without the US, however, the European NATO partners would not be in a position to deter Russia from potentially encroaching on allied territory. The conventional military and nuclear strength...
of the US forms the backbone for its European partners and their armed forces.

Based on its geographical position, Germany serves both as bridgehead and logistics hub for US forces. At the same time, European allies to the north and east expect considerable military support from the German economic powerhouse. If these countries were to lose the military backing of Washington and Berlin, they could be forced to follow an appeasement policy toward Russia. In addition to this, a country the size of Germany will not be able to abstain from participating in international crisis management beyond NATO territory.

In order to fulfill both these functions, Germany agreed in the run-up to the May 2017 NATO meeting to set comprehensive capability targets for its armed forces. It is estimated that this will require spending 2 percent of GDP on defense as early as in the mid-2020s. (The current German defense budget amounts to 1.2 percent of GDP.) Capability targets will probably not be reached before the 2030s.

Threats and Weaknesses

President Trump is unlikely to back off from his demand for higher defense spending. Indeed, he is only calling for what Europeans themselves agreed to and what is in their own interest. If they fail to increase their spending, there is a real danger of the US actually downgrading its commitment to Europe. In this context there is a particular focus on Germany as the biggest and economically strongest European NATO member. The 2-percent target seems comparatively modest when one considers the possibility of the Europeans having to counterbalance Russia on their own; manage crises in the Middle East; or protect international trade routes.

Germany’s greatest weakness under the current circumstances is its own population’s critical attitude toward German military power in foreign and security policy. For example, recent surveys have shown that the majority of the public would not be prepared to defend the Baltic states against a Russian military attack. This attitude may be grounded in Germany’s history, but it weakens the country’s credibility as one of Europe’s leading military nations. Moreover, it is currently not clear whether Germany is really prepared to accept the role of Europe’s strongest conventional force or to impose an increase in defense spending in the face of potential public resistance.

In the eyes of many NATO members, Donald Trump, too, poses a threat to the Alliance’s cohesion and ability to act. His statements about NATO during the US election campaign; his belated endorsement of the mutual defense clause; his retreat from international agreements; and his fundamental lack of predictability have led Alliance partners to severely doubt the reliability of the US under its current president.

Opportunities and Strengths

In a changed security policy environment, Europe’s NATO members have recognized an ongoing need for military power in international politics. While military solutions may not ultimately be the answer to political problems, neither Vladimir Putin nor ISIS have yet to be converted to this view. It is this fact, combined with the wariness inspired by Donald Trump, that has increased readiness of Europeans to invest more in defense and build up their – sorely needed – military capability and cooperation for greater defense efficiency.

Achieving capability targets would send a credible signal to the US that Europeans are serious about burden sharing in NATO and about solving security policy problems in a more cooperative manner and on a par with the US. This is the only way to ensure a continuation of much-needed US solidarity. At the same time, Europe’s NATO members would increase their own military capabilities in the long term, preparing them for an event where the US may not wish to engage jointly, be it fully or only in part, in a particular military scenario.

In this context, Germany’s most important strengths are its size, its economic power, and its political weight in Europe. On this basis, Germany can substantially increase its military weight, improve European defense capability, and secure continued influence in NATO and the EU.

Policy Recommendations

To follow the traditional dual strategy of transatlantic and European alignment, the new German government should:

- **Step up efforts to explain the importance of military power to the public**

Place military power in the context of both foreign policy and security policy and clarify that deterring a potential opponent requires the credible underpinning of military capabilities – and the political will to deploy them.
• **Clearly acknowledge the pledge to commit to NATO’s 2-percent goal**
  
  Increase the defense budget and strengthen the armed forces consistently. The Bundeswehr’s drastically reduced capabilities have limited the political scope for military action; it will take at least 15 to 20 years to reach capability targets. To prevent this situation from recurring, the armed forces should be strengthened permanently.

• **Drive European military capability forward and cooperate more closely to increase efficiency**
  
  Caveat: Pointing out the current lack of cooperation in Europe is not an acceptable argument for delaying overdue investments in the armed forces.

• **Strengthen Germany’s role as a framework nation**
  
  Germany makes it possible for smaller European partners to participate in larger military structures, an integration that increases efficiency. Neighbors such as Poland expect support from Germany. Both of these arrangements require a level of military strength that Germany is still far from attaining. For many of its neighbors, the cause of concern is Germany’s military weakness, not its military strength.

• **Stress to the public that Germany and the US have stood together as partners for decades**
  
  This by no means rules out criticism of President Trump, who has deeply shaken the German public’s trust in the US. His administration’s controversial domestic and foreign policy reinforces latent anti-Americanism in Germany. However, the next German government should stress that the transatlantic relationship is capable of outlasting the current crisis.

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