



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on February 23, 2010

Gates Complains About NATO Allies

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates complained in his February 23 speech at the National Defense University that our European NATO allies are not spending enough money on defense. These nations spend a much smaller percentage of the GDP and national budget on national defense than America does. Gate's complaint, though, raises a more fundamental question: why is the United States still in NATO?



American military support for Europe and the creation of the NATO military alliance were deemed necessary in the aftermath of the Second World War, when Europe was still recovering from the war and the Soviet Army threatened to overrun all of Europe. Of course, Russia had been just as devastated by war as most of Europe, and without massive amounts of American aid, the Soviet Army might have been pretty weak. But whatever argument may have existed for U.S. military support grew progressively weaker over time.

By the 1970s, those nations which comprised NATO in Europe — West Germany, France, Italy, Britain, the lowlands, Norway, Denmark, and peripheral nations in the Mediterranean — had a much larger economy collectively than the Warsaw Pact. Moreover, these NATO allies had more sophisticated technology than the Soviet Empire.

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Could the NATO nations have defended themselves without American help against the Soviet Union? There is no perfect answer to that question, but European nations which committed themselves to self-defense and non-aggression were able to remain outside the Second World War, which is about as bad as war can get.

Switzerland and Sweden both were completely committed to neutrality. Both also had military forces which were very good for self-defense. The Swiss National Guard was ready to fight instantly upon invasion and the Swiss Air Force, using German Bf109 fighters, could and did defend Swiss airspace against both Nazi and Allied warplanes. Sweden had a very good coastal navy and had the best noncommissioned officer corps in the world. How effective were these self-defense forces? Hitler was deterred.

Finland also proved willing to defend itself, and in the Winter War, Finnish forces inflicted frightful casualties upon the Soviets and — critically — embarrassed Stalin and degraded the fear factor of the



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Soviet military, huge on paper but puny in action. Fear was the greatest weapon of the Soviet Union in the postwar environment. A dash through the Fulda Gap could have reached the Rhine in two days, or so the thinking went — but maybe not. The Soviet Army appears in retrospect to have been hopelessly incompetent in many ways. Tanks that looked menacing at first glance were often badly designed and poorly led. When a Mig 25 Foxbat pilot landed his presumably high tech fighter in Japan during the mid-1970s, Americans who examined the fighter found it a relatively poor warplane.

What would have happened if America had given our European allies during the 1960s five years notice that these nations needed to do what the Swiss, Swedes, and Israelis had already done and develop plans for self-defense? The great danger articulated at the time is that this would lead to “Finlandization” — our allies would be put in the same diplomatic box as Finland, which declined to oppose the policies of the Soviet Union. But Finland was otherwise a free, prosperous, democratic nation on friendly terms with the United States — rather like Austria, which was also outside of NATO.

Would the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact have overrun Western Europe? Not if West Germany committed as much of its wealth and will to national defense as Switzerland. The Soviet Army might well have suffered a humiliating defeat in such a campaign. Perhaps just as importantly, the Kremlin would not have wanted a united Germany. Russian hegemony, first within the Soviet Union and then within the Warsaw Pact, would have been upset by a Communist and united Germany.

If the arguments for an American presence in NATO were flawed in 1970, how much more flawed are those arguments in 2010? The infiltration of Europe by radical Islam is a very real threat, but it is not a military threat. Weak as the military of Italy is today, it could savage the combined military forces of all Arab nations from Tunisia to Turkey without breaking a sweat. As Israel has demonstrated over and over, a free, technologically advanced, and determined nation with an objective of self-defense can defeat much larger forces decisively.

Perhaps Secretary Gates might suggest that American troops in Germany are no longer needed there and that if Germany feels threatened by, say, Poland or Denmark, that the German people ought to begin to undertake self-defense planning seriously. The Second World War ended 65 years ago. Why should America continue to protect Europe or, even, to lecture Europeans on how to defend themselves?

Photo of Defense Secretary Robert Gates: AP Images



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