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Gates Delivers a Message That America's NATO Allies Should Heed
by
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As Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld always made noise, but did not necessarily exercise good judgment. Robert M. Gates, Rumsfeld's quiet but effective successor, is going out with a smart bang-up message.

Last week in Brussels, while attending his last meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defense ministers, the quiet Gates criticized the member states of his colleagues for their minimal defense spending.

While difficult to accurately determine, it's estimated that the USA accounts for 75 percent of the entire military budget of the collective 28 member states in NATO. The White House, while acknowledging Gates had raised "legitimate concerns," also made clear he was speaking for the Pentagon.

NATO stays under the radar until something happens such as the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia or the revolt in Libya. In between crises, our interest in NATO lies dormant.

A touch of history: NATO was formed in the spring of 1949 by the democracies of Europe and the USA to challenge the Soviet Union's movement into and takeover of Eastern Europe. Among the early leaders of the original ten member states of NATO were Paul-Henri Spaak, of Belgium, and Robert Schuman, of France, who were also founders of the European Community, now the European Union, and believers in the concept of an Atlantic Community — the United States and the democratic governments of Europe.

While created as a classic military alliance in 1949, its leadership originally sought more. Concurrent with creating the alliance, they also created the Coal and Steel Community, EURATOM, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In the 1940s and 50s, Jean Monnet was credited with fathering and advancing the cause of European political and economic federation. Here in the states, Clarence K. Streit was known for his concept of Atlantic Union, which would initially bind the democracies of Europe with the United States. Spaak and Schuman supported the aspirations of both Monnet and Streit.

Back in 1963, while working in the Information Secretariat of NATO, when it was located in Paris before moving to Brussels, I authored "A Compilation On the Non-Military Aspects of NATO and the Atlantic Community," which NATO published. What I put together were quotations from European and American political leaders on economic, political, scientific, and cultural aspects of what NATO and the Atlantic Community could accomplish above and beyond the military role of NATO. NATO unfortunately missed somewhere along the way its opportunity to expand beyond its purely military role.

Until the European Union began to take hold in the late 1980's, there was a strong belief and movement here and abroad which felt the role of the United States was to engage in cooperative efforts with our NATO allies to advance as a unit the political, cultural, scientific life of the Atlantic Community. Unfortunately, that belief in an Atlantic Community has declined in recent years.

Today many, including this writer, feel NATO has effectively become a vehicle whereby the United States pays a significant share for the defense of many wealthy European countries. When I worked for NATO, it consisted of 15 nations, today it has 28 members. A number of those new members states are former members of the Warsaw Pact, NATO's opposite number during the Cold War prior to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Gates is a believer in NATO, as am I. What he accomplished in Brussels last week was to warn our allies that America can't and probably won't continue to pay 75 percent of the defense cost of 28 nations in NATO. The role of NATO in Afghanistan has been debated particularly given the fact that large stockpiles of ammunition utilized by NATO consisted of properties of this country. Our allies didn't have or bring sufficient stockpiles of the necessary tools of war to Afghanistan.

The efforts of France and the United Kingdom, acting on behalf of NATO in Libya in recent weeks, are teaching these two allies the real cost. France is spending \$2 million a day in Libya, about the same as this country. However, France's military budget for 2011 is a mere \$43 billion, representing for comparison purposes 6.1 percent of this country's military budget. Great Britain is spending \$9.8 million a week in Libya, yet the entire British military budget is 7.9 percent of our annual military expenditure.

Numerous European countries enjoy social programs which citizens in this country would also enjoy. Those countries enjoy such benefits in part because their military budgets don't reflect the real cost of their defense.

Gates' departing shot for fiscal responsibility within NATO and for an equitable sharing of military spending within NATO was right on the mark. We need NATO, but the members of NATO need us as well. We need to leverage our role in NATO to achieve greater defense spending by our allies, and in achieving such, remove a significant burden upon American taxpayers.

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