

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 46
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2016*

Article 7

Spring 3-1-2016

The United States as the Reluctant Ally

Magnus Petersson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Magnus Petersson, "The United States as the Reluctant Ally," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2823.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

US LEADERSHIP AND NATO

The United States as the Reluctant Ally

Magnus Petersson

© 2016 Magnus Petersson

ABSTRACT: US leadership in NATO has been declining since the Cold War ended. From a European perspective, the United States looks more and more like a “reluctant ally.” A re-nationalization of European security could occur without strong US leadership. The United States should, therefore, reassert itself in European security affairs—not with costly troop contributions, but by facilitating European unity and the development of relevant force structures.

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has been the most important alliance for America. US engagement and leadership in NATO has, however, been declining since the Cold War ended; this has been especially true during the Obama administration and in particular since the Libya War in 2011. In general, Obama’s administration has engaged less in international security affairs; the strategic rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific has definitely moved the US focus from Europe to that region.¹

Although the US government plans to send more troops to Europe during 2017 and takes Russian aggression seriously, military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria have moved Washington’s focus from Ukraine and Russia to the Middle East. In addition, the appetite for supporting Europe among US politicians and the American public seems to have declined. From a European perspective, the United States looks more and more like a “reluctant ally,” a characterization normally used by Washington to describe some of NATO’s allies during the Cold War.²

How does this reluctance manifest itself? What might it lead to? How should the United States act to facilitate more security in the transatlantic region without increasing the costs for American taxpayers? A re-nationalization or division of European defense and security is likely to occur without strong US leadership, and that will probably lead to a stronger Russian influence in European affairs which is clearly not in Washington’s interest. The United States should, therefore, regain its leading role in European security affairs—not with massive troop contributions, as in the Cold War, but with strong and firm leadership that can facilitate European unity and help to create relevant force structures capable of defending Europe and contributing to its security.

Magnus Petersson is Professor and Head of the Centre for Transatlantic Studies at the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies in Oslo, Norway. Petersson has been a Visiting Scholar at Boston University, George Washington University, and Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. His latest book, *The US NATO Debate: From Libya to Ukraine*, was published by Bloomsbury Academic (2015).

1 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

2 Janusz Bugajski, “The Reluctant Ally,” *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* 23 (2010): 101-104.

NATO's Declining Role in US Grand Strategy

During the Cold War, Europe had a major role in US grand strategy and the United States led NATO with a firm hand. There was never any doubt the United States was the *primus inter pares* in European security affairs. To borrow Max Weber's concept, Washington led NATO in a charismatic way.³

That has changed however. Even the Ukraine Crisis failed to make Europe a major player in US grand strategy. For example, in his comprehensive speech about the US foreign policy agenda for 2016 at the National Defense University (NDU) in January 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry, used just one sentence to describe the situation in Europe, and in that sentence he mentioned NATO once.⁴

The demonstration of Europe's decreased importance in US security policy was not new. When Robert Gates gave his last major speech as Secretary of Defense he criticized NATO for being a two-tiered alliance, for having a "dim, if not dismal" future, and said future US political leaders "may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."⁵ Gates' view of NATO meetings was they were "excruciatingly boring," and he had to do crossword puzzles to stay awake.⁶

The Obama administration's decline in interest in Europe compared to other regions and the reluctance to lead NATO in traditional ways have been demonstrated over and over again, especially since the Libyan War in 2011.⁷ That war caused a comprehensive discussion in the United States about burden-sharing in NATO between the United States and Europe, and especially who should take the lead in such an operation. Secretary Gates and several other members of the cabinet—even Vice President Joe Biden—were against the war, and the Obama administration wanted NATO's European members to take the lead. In short, they saw the Libyan War as a way for NATO to revitalize itself and to move toward a more fair transatlantic burden-sharing.⁸

During the Libyan War, President Obama stated NATO would take command of the enforcement of the arms embargo and the no-fly zone, and the United States would play "a supporting role."⁹ Later, in a speech to the United Nations at the end of September, the president said the United States "was proud" to play a decisive role in the early days

3 Weber quoted in Joshua Derman, "Max Weber and Charisma: A Transatlantic Affair," *New German Critique* 38, no. 2 (2011): 56.

4 John Kerry, "Remarks on the United States Foreign Policy Agenda for 2016," January 13, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/01/251177.htm> (accessed January 17, 2016).

5 Robert Gates, "The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)," Speech, June 10, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581> (accessed September 18, 2011).

6 Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 194.

7 The arguments and examples given in this article are to a large degree relying on the results in Magnus Petersson, *The US NATO Debate: From Libya to Ukraine* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). In the book, I systematically analyzed the US debate within Congress, the Obama administration, think tanks, and elite media from 2011 to 2014. Further examples can be found in the publication.

8 Gates, *Duty*, 518; and Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 370.

9 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya," March 28, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

of the operation, and then in a supporting capacity.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said the United States had merely “helped” NATO achieve its mission in Libya.¹¹ The message could not be clearer: the United States has willingly stepped back and relinquished its leadership role in the alliance.

Between the end of the Libyan War and the Ukraine Crisis, the Obama administration allowed NATO to “lead itself.” Secretary Panetta, for example, said in Munich (February 2012), that NATO had proven it could handle the security challenges of the 21st century, and moved closer to the vision for the Atlantic community articulated by President John F. Kennedy in 1962, namely, that the United States and Europe should cooperate on a basis of “full equality.”¹²

US and NATO reactions to the Ukraine Crisis in the spring and summer of 2014 were, in contrast, rapid, forceful, and substantial. President Obama took the lead, and it was welcome from a European point of view. Since the Ukraine Crisis, phrases like “leading from behind” or “taking a back seat” dropped from the vocabulary of the administration. The United States sent troops to Europe to bolster US military presence. President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and Secretary of State John Kerry visited Europe several times, especially NATO’s most recent European members, and American and NATO forces were sent to reassure them NATO’s “Musketeer Paragraph”—“one for all and all for one”—Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, was viable.¹³

At the same time, Obama continued to make it quite clear, that leading together also meant sharing the burdens together.¹⁴ After the spring and summer of 2014, the US security debate again turned away from Europe, preferring to cover the military operation against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, later to be known as Operation Inherent Resolve.¹⁵ In August 2014, the *The New York Times* published 252 articles on Ukraine, 277 on Syria, and 360 on Iraq; in January 2015, it published 125 articles on Ukraine, 200 on Syria, and 272 on Iraq; in January 2016, it published 60 articles on Ukraine, 248 on Syria, and 280 on Iraq. The pattern is the same in the *The Washington Post*: 525 articles on Ukraine, 667 on Syria, and 1,125 on Iraq in August 2014; 206 on Ukraine, 479 on Syria, and 740 on Iraq in January 2015; and 111 on Ukraine, 623 on Syria, and 693 on Iraq in January 2016.

The United States has built a large coalition of more than 60 countries to defeat ISIS with political, economic, and military means in the summer of 2014. NATO was not a part of the coalition against ISIS;

10 Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama at High-Level Meeting on Libya,” Speech, September 20, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/20/remarks-president-obama-high-level-meeting-libya> (accessed February 20, 2013).

11 Leon E. Panetta, “Lee H. Hamilton Lecture,” Speech, October 11, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1620> (accessed January 24, 2013).

12 Leon E. Panetta, 48th Munich Security Conference, February 4, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/panetta-clintons-remarks-munich-security-conference-germany/p27293>.

13 Magnus Petersson, “The US and the Wales Summit: Washington is Back, and NATO Is Back to Basics,” *ELN*, September 11, 2014, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org (accessed July 1, 2015).

14 See, for example, Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Renzi of Italy in Joint Press Conference,” Speech, March 27, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/27/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-renzi-italy-joint-press-confe> (accessed July 1, 2014).

15 Lawrence Freedman, “Ukraine and the Art of Exhaustion,” *Survival* 57, no. 5 (October–November 2015): 77–106.

nor did it lead the military operation. In fact, the United States several times made it clear the coalition against ISIS was not a NATO operation. For example, when Secretary Kerry made a statement at NATO Headquarters, in the beginning of December 2014, in connection with a meeting of the participants in the coalition against ISIS, he demonstratively began the meeting by stressing that “despite the location, this is not a NATO event.”¹⁶

During 2015 and 2016, the pattern was the same. Seven of Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter’s speeches and remarks during 2015 were focused on countering ISIL; only one focused on the situation in Europe.¹⁷ The additional \$3.4 billion requested in the FY 2017 budget for strengthening US military presence in Europe (a quadrupling of the request for FY 2016) is clearly an increase, but it must be compared to the request for \$7.5 billion to counter ISIL, and that is not a change in the long-term trend.¹⁸

In sum, the US government has not been willing to lead NATO in a “charismatic way” since the Libyan War. With the exception of the spring and summer of 2014, the Obama administration has instead pointed to NATO’s European allies to step up, take more responsibility, and share the burdens within the alliance. That burden-sharing debate is not new—it has been going on since NATO’s creation. But what is new is the US government’s minimalist view of American engagement within and leadership of NATO. The question is what might it lead to?

Consequences for European and Transatlantic Security

The decreased US interest in Europe is well documented.¹⁹ According to several experts, NATO has transformed to a “post-American” alliance. NATO and Europe are no longer the first strategic priority for the United States. Its major role in American grand strategy has thereby disappeared. Several experts have suggested Washington might expect the European security challenges to be handled primarily by NATO’s European allies in a new transatlantic burden-sharing model, and the US role, therefore, should be principally “Article V-focused.”²⁰ What that means is Europe and NATO should be a more traditional military alliance in US security thinking, comparable to what NATO was before

16 John Kerry, “Remarks at the Counter-ISIL Meeting,” December 3, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/12/234624.htm> (accessed January 6, 2015).

17 See Secretary of Defense Speeches, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches>.

18 Ash Carter, “Submitted Statement – House Appropriations Committee-Defense (FY 2017 Budget Request),” February 25, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/672855/submitted-statement-house-appropriations-committee-defense-fy-2017-budget-request> (accessed March 3, 2016); and “Opening Statement – House Appropriations Committee-Defense (FY 2017 Budget Request),” February 25, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/673093/opening-statement-house-appropriations-committee-defense-fy-2017-budget-request> (accessed, March 3, 2016).

19 Ellen Hallams, “Between Hope and Realism: The United States, NATO and a Transatlantic Bargain for the 21st Century,” in *NATO Beyond 9/11: The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti, and Benjamin Zyla (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 218.

20 Ellen Hallams and Benjamin Schreer, “Towards a ‘Post-American’ Alliance? NATO Burden-Sharing after Libya,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 2 (2012): 313–327.

the Korean War, with mutual security guarantees but without common permanent military command structures.²¹

In theory, that is a perfectly fair argument, however, what might happen if the United States continues to pay less attention to European security? The risk is re-nationalization of security and defense issues, the generation of individual national security thinking and solutions rather than collective ones. That will lead to less cohesion and more friction between European states and thereby decrease the security in Europe. Second, it will generate less security and cooperation between European states, which means less military power and thereby less security in Europe. Third, it will create a bi-lateralization of security issues between European states, between single European states and Russia, and between single European states and the United States.

As has been shown several times, the European Union (EU) is not an alternative to NATO and the transatlantic security community. The EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) is largely a failure. As the Libyan crisis showed "precisely the type of mission for which the EU, via CSDP, had been preparing" could not be handled by the European Union.²² A similar failure occurred in 2008 when the United Nations requested EU military support for the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC).²³ In fact, the EU battle groups that have been fully operational since 2007, have never been used.

Russia would almost certainly welcome a re-nationalization of security and defense issues in Europe. In such a situation Russia could always be an equal partner among the regional great powers in Europe (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) and could play one against the other. The small states will, in turn, be squeezed between the regional great powers and dependent on their power plays. The United States will also be dragged into them, directly or indirectly, in addition to dealing with its own complicated bilateral relationships with 26 European NATO members and 22 NATO partners. That would be an extremely difficult situation with 48 European states competing with each other for US attention and support. The effect would be more friction and less security in Europe.

Fourth, re-nationalization would mean less security for the United States. If Washington leaves the permanent command structures, the capability gap between NATO's European members will increase even more and the degree of interoperability between American and European forces—which actually is relatively high after 25 years of joint operations—will decline. That will leave the United States with fewer possibilities and less flexibility when it wants to use force for political purposes.

21 Sean Kay, "No More Free-Riding: The Political Economy of Military Power and the Transatlantic Relationship," in *NATO's European Allies: Military Capability and Political Will*, ed. Janne Haaland Matlary and Magnus Pettersson (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). See also Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January/February 2013) and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

22 Jolyon Howorth, "European Defense Policy Needs Recalibration," *foreignpolicy.com*, June 29, 2012, (accessed March 3, 2016).

23 Ludovica Marchi Balossi-Restelli, "Fit for what? Towards explaining Battlegroup Inaction," *European Security* 20, no. 2 (2011): 155.

Finally, a transatlantic drift in combination with a re-nationalization of European security and defense will have ideological and cultural implications: Western ideas, values, norms, and rules will not set powerful global standards as they do today, and that will lead to less security not only for the West, but globally. So what should the United States do?

Conclusion

The Obama administration's interest in European security affairs has been moderate to low. Nothing indicates the next administration—even if Hillary Clinton is elected, the least isolationist candidate—will be more interested. On the contrary, the rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific will continue with the view that China is the only global challenge for the United States. But Russia has recently shown it can create real problems for the United States in Europe and in the Middle East. If America continues to disengage from Europe, things could get much worse. Recently, the US government recognized this possibility, and the United States seems more interested in leading again, which offers some hope.²⁴

Europeans realize the United States is not coming back to Europe with massive military power and economic resources as it did during the Cold War; at its peak in 1953, the United States had 450,000 troops in Europe.²⁵ Those numbers are not necessary either, since Europe's economy equals the US economy at present, and since NATO's European states—although there are always complaints about defense spending in Europe—spend three times as much on defense as Russia (around \$230 billion dollars compared to Russia's \$80 billion dollars) to defend a territory four times smaller. Russia's GDP is ten times smaller than Europe's and smaller than the French, German, and UK economies individually.

The balance within NATO must shift so Europe's NATO forces can take care of European defense with American forces acting largely as force enablers. To achieve that, what Europe needs is not US resources and military power, but US leadership, engagement, and advice in security and defense issues.

Leadership is the most important contribution because it creates cohesion and confidence, and avoids a re-nationalization of defense and security in Europe. The United States should therefore demonstrate its will to lead NATO in a traditional way, as a *primus inter pares*, and lead Europe through NATO; it must not bilateralize its relations with NATO members and partners. A strong and trusted leader of NATO will restore confidence in NATO and Article V.

The United States should also lead the way in creating larger forces. Most NATO members are too small to operate above battalion size, and they have so few units they cannot operate over time (sustainability), nor do two things at the same time (flexibility). In addition, the staffs and commanders have lost their competence in leading larger formations.

24 Ash Carter, "Submitted Statement – Senate Appropriations Committee-Defense (FY 2017 Budget Request)," April 27, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/744066/submitted-statement-senate-appropriations-committee-defense-fy-2017-budget-requ> (accessed April 30, 2016).

25 Luke Coffey, "The Future of US Bases in Europe: A View from America," Lecture #1233 on National Security and Defense, July 15, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/the-future-of-us-bases-in-europe-a-view-from-america> (accessed January 9, 2015).

Joint force generation has been tried in NATO for a long time; the latest example is the “Very High Reaction Joint Task Force” (VJTTF) that would be able to deploy a multinational brigade (5,000 troops) within days, supported by air, maritime, and special forces.²⁶ But joint force generation is not the basic principle of force generation in Europe, and with US leadership and experience in building and leading larger forces that could be changed.

America should also lead the Europeans by encouraging a higher degree of interoperability. As John Deni has argued, ISAF forced the NATO countries to develop an “unprecedented depth of operational and tactical interoperability.”²⁷ But this high level of interoperability will go down if it is not maintained. Deni suggests the United States should use its forward-based troops to exercise and train with European forces. That is a good suggestion, and the degree of interoperability could increase even more if it also includes the technical level; common procurement of weapons systems. The United States should take the lead in such procurement programs within NATO.

The United States should also take the lead in facilitating the establishment of European forces that have a higher degree of mobility. Reinforcing Eastern or Southern Europe’s (including Turkey’s) defense in a crisis from the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, or Spain requires expeditionary capacity, which the Europeans do not have. Creating forces that can move fast and securely over long distances has for a long time been a US specialty and it could be used to lead such a program. In addition, this could benefit the United States in other ways should it need European partners in other parts of the world.

American engagement in Europe is also important because it guarantees a continued transatlantic security community on a political and strategic level. “The West” is under pressure in several ways, not just strategically but also politically and culturally. The Western world order, created after World War II, is being challenged, and alternative visions of order are emerging on different levels and in different regions.²⁸ The United States should, therefore, continue to engage in European affairs for its own sake.

The United States knows how to create the best military forces in the world, and it can offer valuable advice in creating a European military force that is capable of defending Europe, shaping the security environment around Europe, and operating—when necessary—with the US Armed Forces. As Constanze Stelzenmüller argued recently, the focus should be moved from how much to spend (the input) to how much to get (the output): “the United States should help Europe figure out how to develop its capabilities, use its budgets more intelligently,

26 Martin Zapfe, “NATO’s Spearhead Force,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 174 (May 2015); NATO “Fact Sheet,” March 9, 2015, www.aco.nato.int (accessed December 29, 2015).

27 John R. Deni, “Maintaining Transatlantic Strategic, Operational and Tactical Interoperability in an Era of Austerity,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 583-600.

28 Trine Flockhart, “An Agenda for NATO’s 2016 Warsaw Summit: Back to Basics or Just Backwards?” *DIIS Policy Brief*, August 2015, http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/246614/PB_NATO_FINAL_WEB.pdf (accessed March 2, 2016).

and create more common European assets and forces (rather than use bilateral relationships to foster divisions).”²⁹

NATO will survive. But if it wants to be a relevant and effective instrument for creating European, transatlantic, and—in a wider sense—global security, it must be led firmly and strongly by an engaged United States. Unfortunately, there are few signs of that when looking at the low importance Europe and NATO are given in US grand strategy. But there is hope; if the United States could lead more, engage more, and advise more in Europe—which is not costly—it could be the foundation of a fairer burden-sharing and a more stable transatlantic security community.

²⁹ Constanze Stelzenmüller, “Europe to Planet America: Stay With Us, But Don’t Stampede Us,” *German Marshall Fund Policy Brief*, September 2015, 4.