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# *The End of the Affair*

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*By Ted Galen Carpenter*

**I**t would seem self-evident that wise leaders should always seek to maintain the maximum degree of flexibility and choice in foreign policy. Commitments and strategies that may make sense under one set of conditions can become obsolete and even counterproductive when circumstances change. Therefore, it is imprudent and potentially dangerous to lock one's country into a set of rigid, long-term obligations.

Unfortunately, NATO is the premier example of a willingness—indeed eagerness—to violate that important principle. NATO was an institution to deal with the Cold War; it is not only obsolete for the conditions of the twenty-first century, it has become a dangerous albatross around the neck of the American republic. U.S. leaders continue going out of their way to limit America's policy options in order to “reassure” a growing roster of European security dependents that the United States remains willing to incur any risk and pay any price to protect them, no matter how trivial and vulnerable they might be. That policy badly needs to change.

Rigid and/or obsolete commitments have caused problems for great powers throughout history. Perhaps the most tragic example

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occurred during the years leading up to World War I. Europe's major countries had divided themselves into rival security blocs, the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. When tensions soared in 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, those alliances transformed an emotional, but limited, dispute between Austria and tiny Serbia into a continental crisis. Today's NATO is the potential incubator of a similar catastrophe.

The fear of being locked into unjustified and potentially dangerous security commitments was a key reason why America's founders were so averse to “entangling alliances.” In his Farewell Address, George Washington made an important distinction between permanent and temporary alliances. He asserted that the United States should “steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” Such obligations would tie the republic to partners for unforeseen contingencies far into the future. Conversely, Washington acknowledged that “we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extra-ordinary emergencies.” It was an astute distinction that in no way reflected the simplistic notion of “isolationism.” Instead, his strategy embodied the principle of selectivity, and it expressed a shrewd note of caution that is even more relevant today than it was in Washington's time. NATO has become the ultimate permanent alliance, with all the defects and perils of such an arrangement.

Later influential American political figures echoed Washington's admonition to preserve the maximum degree of choice and flexibility in U.S. foreign policy. Both in his Senate speeches opposing ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty, and in his subsequent book, *A Foreign Policy for Americans*, Senator Robert A. Taft stressed those points. He dubbed his approach the policy of "the free hand." That standard also should be the core principle of U.S. policy toward Europe in the twenty-first century.

A more limited, flexible approach would not imply U.S. indifference to geo-strategic developments in Europe. It certainly would not be based on the silly notions that knee-jerk advocates of the policy status quo habitually trot out—the canard that a more selective strategy amounts to "isolationism," or "turning our backs on the world," or renouncing all aspects of "U.S. leadership." It is long past time to move the NATO policy debate beyond such overwrought, mind-numbing clichés and discuss meaningful policy choices.

Unfortunately, pro-NATO types cling ever more tenaciously to an outdated status quo. Indeed, many of them express a sneering resentment toward the mere suggestion that NATO has outlived its usefulness or that Americans should consider alternative policies. There is a worrisome degree of group-think and a herd mentality in favor of the alliance within both the U.S. foreign policy community and most of the media. Such a phenomenon is unhealthy with respect

to any policy debate, but it is especially so regarding the future of U.S. security policy toward Europe. Continuing the blunders that have marked Washington's European policies since the demise of the Soviet Union is not only wasteful but increasingly dangerous. Rote invocations of the alleged need for an endless U.S. commitment to NATO do not change that reality.

It is imperative to overcome the stifling influence of stale thinking and vested interests regarding NATO. Article V is a de facto automatic commitment to go to war

if an ally (however minor or strategically irrelevant) becomes embroiled in an armed conflict, and such an obligation is more imprudent than ever before. The costs and risks of Washington's security obligations to its European allies now substantially outweigh any existing or potential benefits. When a great power reaches that point with regard to any policy, the need for drastic change becomes urgent. America's NATO commitment has arrived at that point. U.S. leaders must craft a more nuanced and selective security relationship between the United States and Europe.

A fresh strategy would embody several important principles, and adopting those principles may well determine whether the United States enjoys a prolonged era of peace or finds itself repeatedly drawn into petty conflicts that have little or no relevance to the fundamental interests of the American republic. Even more important, embracing the correct principles may determine whether the United States can avoid a cataclysmic military collision with a nuclear-armed Russia.

*Constantly invoking the history of NATO solidarity as a reason to preserve the alliance (as NATO's defenders do) epitomizes a foreign policy based on nostalgia. Regardless of the relevance NATO may have had during the long Cold War with the Soviet Union, we need a new strategy for a very different era and a very different Europe.*

Constantly invoking the history of NATO solidarity as a reason to preserve the alliance (as NATO's defenders do) epitomizes a foreign policy based on nostalgia. Regardless of the relevance NATO may have had during the long Cold War with the Soviet Union, we need a new strategy for a very different era and a very different Europe. Nostalgia is an extremely poor foundation for an intelligent foreign policy.

**A**n appropriate new security strategy would recognize that although the United States has some important interests in Europe, not everything that occurs on the continent is essential to America's well-being. There is a vast difference between preventing a hostile would-be global hegemon, such as the Soviet Union, from gaining control of Europe versus trying to resolve every incident of political upheaval or every dispute among two or more European nations. Most incidents, however disagreeable or disorderly, do not pose a potential existential (or even meaningful) threat to the United States.

The turmoil that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s is a prime example of a development that warranted no more than a minimal, purely diplomatic, U.S. effort. It certainly did not require America's military involvement, much less the assumption of the leadership role to micromanage the distribution of political power within the former Yugoslavia's successor states.

A well-conceived strategy would have avoided such pitfalls. It would have realized that sorting out post-communist political arrangements in the Balkans did not constitute a systemic crisis that could create chaos throughout Europe and impinge on crucial American interests. The nature, severity or scale of the turbulence (much less all three factors) never came close to reaching the point that the United States needed

to intervene. Such events were modest, sub-regional changes that the major European powers, either through the European Union (EU) or on an ad-hoc basis, could have—and should have—managed on their own. U.S. involvement, especially military involvement, should be reserved for negative developments that pose a serious problem for the entire transatlantic region, not merely constitute a parochial conflict, however unfortunate, in a strategic backwater like the Balkans.

Conversely, if a great power and would-be European hegemon like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union arose and began to pursue an extensive expansionist agenda, such a development would clearly be a matter of grave concern for the United States. Few Americans would be willing to tolerate the emergence of a hostile power capable of dominating Europe and being intent on that goal. If a European security entity could not contain the rise of such a hostile power, the United States might have to intervene. But in the world of the twenty-first century, that is an exceedingly remote scenario. NATO partisans are inclined to hype much more limited problems (such as Russia's actions in its immediate neighborhood) in an effort to preserve their cherished institution and their own prominence. But Americans should not allow such exaggerated fears to be a pretext for preserving an obsolete policy that perpetuates Washington's micromanagement of Europe's security affairs.

**A**nother badly needed feature of a new transatlantic policy is U.S. willingness to treat the European Union (or even an alliance restricted to the handful of major European powers) as a credible security actor, not a perpetual U.S. dependent or obedient junior partner. European military capabilities are far from trivial, even though they can and probably



should be enhanced. Most security disruptions that have arisen on Europe's perimeter, including the mundane territorial disputes between Russia and such neighbors as Georgia and Ukraine, are not major threats that bring important American interests into play.

As in the case of instability in the Balkans, such problems are far more relevant to the European nations than they are to the United States. Europe's principal powers not only can handle such challenges on their own, they should be expected to do so. Collectively, EU members have three times the population and an economy nearly ten times larger than Russia's; that is a sufficient foundation to build whatever deterrent and defense forces are needed.

Insisting that all security issues be addressed and resolved through NATO—with Washington in charge of policy—is a manifestation of obsolete thinking that imposes needless burdens and responsibilities onto the United States. It is a strategy reflecting national narcissism.

Not only should the major European powers, through either the EU or another "Europeans only" mechanism, oversee dealing with all modest challenges on Europe itself—they should have responsibility for addressing problems in the Middle East and North Africa (also known as the Greater Middle East). That region is adjacent to Europe but thousands of miles from the American homeland. It is unfair and unrealistic for Washington to insist on directing efforts to preserve stability, protect the oil flow, prevent human rights abuses and confront the multitude of other problems that bedevil that chronically volatile part of the world. Developments in the Greater Middle East have a direct impact to varying degrees on the well-being of European countries. The wave of refugees currently fleeing war-torn Middle East nations and causing political, economic and social strains throughout Europe is an example of the region's substantial relevance to the continent.

The impact of adverse Greater Middle East developments on the United States

*Image: Russian president Vladimir Putin addresses the Federal Assembly. Sputnik/Alexei Nikolsky/Kremlin.*

is far milder by virtue of greater distance. America's minimal dependence on oil from that area also gives this country more options than those available to European powers. Moreover, Washington's track record in trying to manage Greater Middle East affairs to maintain stability there is dismal. Even before the recent U.S.-led fiascos in Iraq, Libya and Syria, America's meddling had created far more problems than it solved. The 9/11 attacks were an especially graphic manifestation of blow-back from Washington's clumsy, tone-deaf behavior.

Given their own history of colonial misdeeds in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (especially by Britain and France), the European powers would confront significant obstacles of their own to developing a united, coherent policy regarding the turbulent Greater Middle East. But they could scarcely do worse than the U.S. record. Since they have more at stake than does America with respect to Middle East affairs, they should have responsibility for policy toward their difficult neighbors. American involvement, to the extent that it takes place at all, should be confined to a marginal, supportive role.

**T**he most plausible case for preserving a dominant U.S. role in transatlantic security affairs through NATO is that it would be an insurance policy against the re-emergence of a rogue great power that could pose a broad, lethal security menace. U.S. leaders and those in some European members of NATO clearly have designated Russia for that role already. But their view is based either on

misperceptions or a deliberate attempt to create a new rationale for preserving and expanding NATO.

Whatever the motive, the strategy is both dangerous and unnecessary. A willingness on the part of the Western powers to accept a modest Russian sphere of influence and treat that country's government with greater respect would solve most of the current problems in East-West relations and markedly reduce tensions. Adopting a less confrontational course, however, requires more realistic thinking on the part of U.S. policymakers. In particular, it means recognizing that spheres of influence are still very much a part of the international system and that major powers are likely to insist on enjoying that prerogative.

Unfortunately, too many U.S. officials seemingly regard the idea that major powers will insist on maintaining spheres of influence as distasteful and illegitimate. Both Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush's second secretary of state, and John Kerry, Barack Obama's second secretary of state, made that argument explicitly. They clearly were not willing to acknowledge that Russia could have such a zone of preeminence. Indeed, Rice condemned the entire concept of spheres of influence as "archaic."

Adopting a more realistic, nuanced position also would require modifying the professed faith of U.S. officialdom that the United States is the leader—and has been since the end of World War II—of a liberal, "rules-based," international order. Under that system, all countries are supposed to abide by the strictures of international law and not threaten, intimidate or attack other countries.

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The history of the post-World War II era, however, confirms that the United States and its allies have violated those principles whenever it seemed convenient to do so. It is very hard to square a liberal, rules-based international system with episodes such as the U.S.-led military interventions in Vietnam and Iraq, NATO's military missions in the Balkans during the 1990s, the NATO-assisted overthrow of Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi, or the ongoing military meddling by the United States and several allies in Syria.

Respecting spheres of influence would require a reduced definition of Washington's own power prerogatives. U.S. leaders implicitly assert the right to intervene anywhere in the world to advance the country's foreign policy objectives. In practice, recent generations of policymakers have globalized the Monroe Doctrine; to them, America's rightful sphere of influence is "the sphere"—planet Earth.

But Russia and other major powers are not willing to accord the United States the status of global hegemon. They are digging-in their heels and insisting that Washington respect their own (much more modest) spheres of influence. For Russia, that means asserting preeminence regarding nations along its borders in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow is not alone in pushing back against Washington's attempts at asserting global hegemony. China's actions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait provide ample indications that Beijing is setting limits to what it will tolerate from the United States.

To prevent the escalation of dangerous tensions with Moscow (and Beijing), U.S. leaders must dial-back their insistence that all nations, even great powers, adhere to the principles of a U.S.-led liberal, rules-based, international order. That system has been more fictional, or at least aspirational, than factual in any case. To maintain peace, American policymakers must accept that

Russia and other great powers will insist upon and act according to the reality of spheres of influence. The objective of the EU powers, with Washington's quiet, limited support, should be to place some limits on the extent of the Russian sphere of influence, since at some point, Russia's concept will impinge on significant EU interests. It is the mission of effective diplomacy to sort out such matters and set workable, recognizable limits on the ambitions of contending parties. But seeking to delegitimize the entire concept of spheres of influence is a nonstarter for even reasonably cordial East-West relations.

**T**he basic principles of an improved transatlantic security relationship are reasonably straightforward. One recognizes that while American and European security interests overlap, they also diverge in many cases, and require a more flexible security structure so that the United States does not intervene in every unpleasant development that Europe might encounter. Only when vital interests on both sides of the Atlantic are at stake is joint action warranted. Less severe and more geographically limited problems in Europe can and should be addressed by regional or even subregional actors.

A second component acknowledges that the European Union already is a leading global economic player, and that it is important for the European nations acting either through that body or another European-only mechanism to play a security role commensurate with that economic power. Accepting such a change in the transatlantic power structure means understanding how much the world has changed since the United States put a weak, devastated Europe behind the American security shield seven decades ago.

A third feature of a more enlightened, effective policy recognizes that Russia, for

all its flaws, is not a messianic expansionist power. Treating Russia as merely a more recent incarnation of the Soviet Union has been counterproductive, if not outright corrosive to prospects for regional and global peace. Moscow does not pose an existential threat either to the United States or to Europe. Russia may behave from time to time as an abrasive—even overbearing—power. But the Kremlin’s conduct is not out of the ordinary in how major regional powers tend to treat smaller, weaker neighbors. Russia’s disruptive behavior is far more limited—both in intensity and scope—than the kind of threat that such countries as Napoleonic France, Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union posed. The United States must grasp that crucial difference. A robust, engaged European security entity is quite capable of balancing a relatively mundane, if somewhat prickly, regional power like Russia. The United States should let such balancing behavior take its normal course.

The final component of a new U.S. policy would avoid trying to enshrine an exaggerated, inconsistent and largely aspirational liberal international order as the operational reality in global or even European affairs. Longstanding features of international politics still apply, despite Western rhetoric to the contrary. Such features as security zones and spheres of influence are key aspects of international relations, however much some policymakers wish to deny that reality. A new, more effective transatlantic security strategy must acknowledge and respect a reasonable Russian sphere of influence on its perimeter, including in

Eastern Europe. It would be a policy based on both realism and restraint.

Abandoning the vain quest for U.S. global primacy includes no longer attempting to dominate Europe’s security affairs. The United States is badly overextended, militarily, politically and economically around the world. Embracing a more limited, selective role that focuses on a reduced roster of policy goals is essential. One of the earliest, and most feasible, places to offload excessive responsibilities is Europe.

To do that, American leaders should propose a new relationship with an independent European security organization. The European powers must address security challenges on their own and learn to live with the results. It does not help for the United States to encourage, if not insist upon, continued European dependence on U.S. protection—and continued deference to Washington’s dominance. That approach merely retards the needed steps toward greater European policy independence and responsibility. American leaders need to encourage that maturation, not obstruct it.

Washington should pursue a strategy to implement an orderly, but prompt, transfer of responsibility for Europe’s security to the nations of democratic Europe. The ultimate goal should be to phase-out U.S. membership in NATO—an alliance that is showing multiple signs of dysfunction. The initial step would be to withdraw U.S. military forces from the European theater. Within two years, the United States ought to complete the withdrawal of all ground units and reduce its naval and air forces in Europe by at least 50 percent. On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the

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North Atlantic Treaty in 2024, Washington should complete that withdrawal and give a one-year notice that it is terminating U.S. membership in the treaty. The option of occasional deployments of U.S. air and naval units should be kept open, based on the specifics of any agreements with the responsible European security organization or individual major powers, and Washington's own assessment of the overall security environment. Care must be taken, though, that periodic, limited deployments do not become perpetual, large-scale "rotational" deployments that amount to a permanent U.S. military presence in all but name.

Unfortunately, the desperation of NATO partisans to preserve their institution is intense. The House of Representatives' passage of the NATO Support Act in January 2019, barring the use of funds to facilitate U.S. withdrawal from the alliance in any way, is symptomatic of that attitude. The constitutionality of such legislation is highly suspect, since presidents throughout history have enjoyed wide latitude regarding both troop deployments and continued adherence to treaties. A transparent congressional attempt to usurp that authority and seek to micromanage U.S. foreign policy is both unwarranted and unhealthy. Whoever occupies the White House in the future must have the right to implement needed policy changes regarding NATO.

Great wailing and despair from the NATO preservation crowd on both sides of the Atlantic will inevitably accompany any meaningful U.S. policy shift. But seven decades is an exceedingly long period for any policy to be relevant and beneficial (much less optimal), and America's NATO membership is no exception. Indeed, it seems to epitomize the problem of policy entropy. A U.S.-led NATO is now well beyond its appropriate expiration date. It is time to accord the alliance the retirement celebration that should have been held

when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union dissolved.

Adopting a new, more restrained posture does not mean that the United States will take no interest in Europe's affairs. We need to reject the simplistic "light switch model" of America's engagement in the world—that there are only two possible settings: "off and on." There are many settings between those two extremes, and there are multiple forms of engagement—diplomatic, economic and cultural, as well as security.

Every effort should be made to preserve a robust, mutually beneficial transatlantic economic relationship. The United States also can and should maintain extensive diplomatic and cultural connections with Europe. And Washington should forge a coordinating mechanism either with a new European security organization or on a bilateral basis with the continent's main military powers to address issues of mutual concern. Beyond that aspect, there is nothing to prevent joint military exercises and even temporary deployments of U.S. air and naval units, if the security environment turns more threatening. But America does not need to continue being Europe's security blanket/hegemon.

That more flexible approach would constitute an updated version of Taft's policy of the free hand. Moreover, it would be one component of a U.S. global grand strategy based on realism and restraint. America would no longer shackle itself to commitments that have more drawbacks than benefits and lock the republic into obligations that no longer make sense. It would end the thankless, unproductive strategy of trying to micromanage the security affairs of both Europe and the neighboring Middle East. It is perverse for U.S. leaders to seek to deny their own country the essential element of policy choice. A sustainable transatlantic policy for the twenty-first century must rest firmly on the principle of maximum choice for the United States. □