

The Trans-Atlantic Numbers Game

By Josef Joffe

There is a trans-Atlantic numbers game going on, and anybody who can spell "North Atlantic Treaty Organization" can play. First you tally the percentages, and you discover that the United States devotes six percent of its gross national product to its military while the West Europeans collectively spend only three percent. Then you do fractions and point out that America allocates three-fifths of its defense budget to NATO, and what do you get?

You get a sucker called Uncle Sam and a bunch of free-loading Europeans who have grown rich in a cozy shelter built courtesy of the American taxpayer.

If that is your game, and it is being played like the slots by Congressmen and pundits these days, you always

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win. Except that, instead of ringing bells and flashing lights, there is a sonorous voice that intones: "We must press the Europeans to do more for themselves."

But things are not that simple. First, there is a difference between a superpower and its smaller allies. Great powers have great interests; lesser nations view their roles more modestly. Great powers are present everywhere; small powers worry about their backyards. For Belgians, "Manila" denotes a decent cigar; for the United States, the Philippines represents a pillar of its global strategy. Hegemony does not come cheap, and that is why blithe comparisons of G.N.P. percentages generate more heat than light.

Nor is six percent of America's G.N.P. for the military inordinately high. That figure is below the postwar average of seven percent. The United States spent more during the wars in Korea and Vietnam, less thereafter, and again more than six percent during the Reagan build-up.

Thus, the nation's rampant budget and trade deficits cannot be blamed on the military. The problem runs deeper, and the real culprit is a familiar denizen in the annals of the modern welfare state — a growing habit of spending more than taxes bring in.

The allies, it must be said, have played the welfare-over-warfare game much more passionately than the Americans. Still, it is machine tools and BMW's from Europe rather than tanks in Europe that have bloated America's trade deficits.

There is also a brighter side, consistently overlooked in America — that Uncle Sam may in fact have himself a bargain. Europeans, Japanese and others continue to finance America's high living standard (by buying up its debt) precisely because Washington provides them with security "Made in the U.S.A." Power has a price — but it also generates handsome profits.

What about the 60 percent of the defense budget said to go to NATO? The figure was calculated by the Pentagon, but it is misleading. Move the troops, tanks and planes from Frankfurt to Fort Bragg, and they would still cost roughly the same. Or take

the ships for reinforcement and naval patrol in the Atlantic; if the United States wants to remain a global power, it would have to keep them for use in the Pacific or in the Gulf.

The point is that the "overhead" for military power cannot be broken down into neat packages with separate price tags. But there is a more general point. What if West Europeans refused to do more for their own defense? What if they concluded in the face of American pressures that they should diminish their dependence on American might through an arrangement with the Russians?

That is a gamble no American administration should ever contemplate. Thanks to the American commitment, Europe has become the most stable place in the world. But that does not mean that the Old Continent no longer matters. Next to the United States and Soviet Union, Europe is still the most important weight in the global balance. To yield such an asset, or merely to accept the risk of Soviet primacy on the continent, would spell an unprecedented defeat for American policy.

Must America maintain 300,000 troops in Europe indefinitely? Not at all. Moscow has produced a tantalizing offer to reduce its intolerable conventional advantage in Europe. If that could be had by negotiations, American troop levels might then be safely drawn down. But NATO should

Just
twist the
figures
to win.

