

Protecting Europe: We Really Mean it

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 27 2017

Yes, we promise. We will protect Europe, no matter what you do or how little you contribute to your own defense or common interests. We were there for you in the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Balkans. And we will be there for you if Russia threatens the Baltic States or causes trouble in the Black Sea, even though these places are far from our shores and confrontations with a nuclear power risks escalation and nuclear war.

Don't listen to the few naysayers among us, not even our new president, NATO skeptic though he is. It doesn't matter how much you spend on defense. One percent of GDP, two percent or no percent, we will defend you. No need to come out of the cafes and put on uniforms, the boys and girls from Kentucky and Kansas will be there for you. We have 70,000 troops stationed in Europe, but we will send more. How about troops on your eastern frontier? How about ballistic missile defense? We will do it. In fact, we are doing it.

Don't worry about the discrepancy between your wealth and power and that of Russia. We haven't noticed that Russia has only a third of the population of the European members of NATO, that these countries, as uninterested in providing their own defense as they appear to be, already spend almost three times what Russia spends on its military, and that the European Union has a GDP that is 12 times bigger than that of Russia. Our politicians don't notice and our press doesn't ask hard questions.

And don't worry about reciprocating in any significant way. Symbolic gestures are good enough. Thanks for helping in that fight against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Last year American forces flew more than 12,000 strikes in Syria while our coalition partners, which included some of our European friends, flew about 600. It's a great team. In Iraq, the coalition was a little more active flying about 3500 of the 15,000 strikes while we did the rest. In Afghanistan the US provides two thirds of the non- Afghan forces holding off the Taliban. More needed? Don't worry, we will do it.

To be sure, once a year at most, our Secretary of Defense will complain at a NATO conference about how little our allies do. Don't worry. It is just ritualistic behavior expected of the incumbent and carries no weight back here. The American public likes the tough talk, but gets little feedback on the impact and is easily diverted. When someone like Donald Trump questions the alliance, all former secretaries and the entire Washington establishment act as if he has done something despicable to the flag. America's job, they are certain, is to take care of Europe's security. And the American public is taught to believe that.

Rest assured. There is nothing the Europeans can do to shake this protection, needed or not. The insults about our intelligence, weight, politics, violence or vulgarity are ignored. There is no thanks and respect required. We are totally there for you though hardly anyone here can explain why. As crazy as it seems, which must be why you keep asking, we really mean it.

About the author:

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Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.