

END NATO

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 12 2011

Secretary Gates' Farewell Tour included a recent stop in Europe and dark comments about the survivability of NATO, the over-aged Western military alliance. He thought that significant increases in European defense spending are needed to save the alliance. I say the disbandment party is long overdue.

When Europe lay devastated after WWII and seemed menaced by the powerful and aggressive Soviet Union, a cross Atlantic military alliance was needed to preserve European freedom. Through a patchwork of military commands and an influx of American troops, a protective wall of security was created within which European recovery and democratization could take place. NATO kept busy concocting plans and running exercises while Europe thrived and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact partners fell further and further behind. The great NATO triumph came without a military test when the Soviet Union finally collapsed having been eaten away by the termites of central planning.

But there was no victory parade for NATO. Instead, NATO expanded to include former Warsaw Pact members and began a search for new missions that has taken it very far from the North Atlantic to the Balkans, Afghanistan, and now Libya. For Americans a post Soviet threat NATO was a way to retain military formations and bases in Europe on increasingly flimsy regional security threats. And for Europeans continuing NATO was a way to avoid the political costs of creating new collective security arrangements to match their increasing economic integration.

Truth be told, the common security interest that once underlay the formation of NATO is non-existent. America worries now about threats emanating from the Persian Gulf and Asia while Europeans, to the extent to which they will admit having security fears, worry about economic migrants from the South and East. NATO structures and plans are basically irrelevant to both sets of concerns. Europeans cannot be shamed into serious sacrifice in order to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan or to hold off rising Chinese influence globally, and Americans are not going to be drawn into doing border patrol work for Europe.

We were wise enough once to create NATO when it was needed. We should be wise enough now to close it down when it is no longer needed. It was in America's interest to prevent a Soviet takeover of Western Europe. The consequence of the loss of Western Europe on American security would have been grave indeed. But today Europeans are not shirking when they refuse to spend more on defense. With or without American forces, Europeans today can easily defend themselves.

A threatened America might well endanger Europe, but America is quite secure by any reasonable standard. Apparently Europeans see it the same way, believing that a Taliban controlled Afghanistan would not pose a grave threat to America, or any other country for that matter, and that it is unclear as of now what the rise of China means in terms of global distribution of power. Thus, Europeans are unwilling to muster much of an effort for either American cause, blocking the Taliban or blocking the Chinese. They likely believe, and perhaps correctly, that fears of Radical Islam and a Rising China are mostly in the imaginations of Americans. NATO is irrelevant to all of this and needs a respectful termination. We can all remain friends without NATO and its inevitable recriminations about relative contributions.

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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.