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Wake Up NATO, You're No Deterrent to Russia ^[1]

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told a Washington audience on Wednesday that Russia's absorption of Crimea is a "wake-up call" for his organization. The alarm had best ring loudly, because NATO has been sleeping deeply.

The Russian aggression has led some Europeans to proclaim, "Thank God for NATO." They assume that the organization formed during the Cold War to thwart any Red Army thrust across Western Europe will certainly protect them from a Russia that is increasingly behaving like its Soviet parent. Former Soviet satellite states are particularly nervous, and even Sweden, which for many years has done well enough on its own, has been so spooked by Russia's Ukraine adventure and recent war games that it is talking about joining NATO.

The organization retains considerable luster from its early years, but its reputation is not in line

with reality. An honest appraisal of NATO's capabilities will quickly find that most of its European members have let their militaries fall into such disrepair that NATO, in terms of accomplishing military missions, is nothing more than a horseless Tonto, while the United States remains the Lone Ranger.

The agreed-upon benchmark for defense spending by NATO's member states is 2 percent of GDP, but as of 2012 only four of the organization's 28 members reached this threshold – the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece and Estonia. In a 2011 speech, then- Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that during the NATO intervention in Libya, every member voted for the mission but fewer than one third took part in the actual air strikes and fewer than half participated at all. “Frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there,” he said. In his memoir *Duty*, Gates said, “just three months into the campaign we had to resupply even our strongest allies with precision-guided bombs and missiles – they had exhausted their meager supply.”

Russia is not Libya. If NATO underperformed against Muammar Qaddafi's sloppy forces, why would anyone think that it could intimidate Russia's first-rate military?

Perhaps diplomacy can resolve the Ukraine crisis, but whatever happens there, the future of NATO deserves close attention. Gates told NATO members in 2011 that during the Cold War, the United States was willing to cover 50 percent of NATO's military spending. That figure has now reached 75 percent. With President Barack Obama's administration intent on containing defense spending wherever it can and an American public worried about domestic economic problems, NATO's other members must recognize that they cannot expect to be propped up indefinitely by the United States. They must demonstrate that they care enough about providing for their own defense that they will shoulder much more of the financial burden required to renew and sustain NATO's credibility.

The European Union is now the world's largest economy and presumably Europe can afford to take better care of itself. For its part, the United States has made clear that its strategic focus is shifting toward Asia. So, Europeans who have long assumed that the United States would ride to their rescue whenever needed had better think again. It is a shame that resources must be devoted to military matters when so many other issues, such as the environment and education, deserve more attention, but Europeans need to accept the fact that they still live in a rough neighborhood and must be able to defend themselves.

For now, NATO as a military deterrent to Russia is more illusion than reality. That is dangerous for everyone. The wake-up call requires a robust response.

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