

Trump Could Tariff NATO Allies That Do Not Pay Up

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(Front row, L-R) NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, President Donald Trump, UK Prime Minister Theresa May, and other NATO heads of state pose for a group photo at the NATO headquarters in Brussels on July 11, 2018. Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images



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Commentary

Russia launched almost 300 drones and missiles in a coordinated attack on [Ukraine's](#) energy infrastructure on Dec. 13. The attack is an apparent attempt to further terrorize Ukrainians into surrender by destroying their heat and light in the middle of winter.

The war has dragged on for almost three years now, and Ukrainians are getting tired. Their army is depleted of personnel and weapons. [Gallup's latest surveys](#) indicate that 52 percent of Ukrainians want to end the war, even if that means giving away land to Russia. Only 38 percent now want to keep fighting until victory, down from 73 percent in 2022.

President-elect [Donald Trump](#) is trying to both minimize the risk of escalation and shift more of the war's burden to European allies that have not paid their fair share of defense expenditures for decades. Such a shift is eminently possible as the United States has so far committed about half of Europe's [\\$255 billion](#) in aid to Ukraine. After the U.S. election, many European leaders have already doubled their commitments. But they must go much further to fully deter Russia.

The U.S. national debt is growing at an unsustainable rate, and without [new revenues](#), Washington can no longer afford to be the world's policeman. Given this unfortunate reality, Trump has led calls for a cease-fire that would likely entail a risk: appeasing Russia with Ukrainian land, which would potentially incentivize Moscow and the regime in China to escalate aggression down the road. If Moscow wins in Ukraine, Beijing could try the same in Taiwan sooner, and the [axis of evil](#) wars, including those of Iran and arguably North Korea, might have no end in sight.

There is a solution: force Europeans to increase their defense spending, including military aid to Ukraine, to at least 3 percent of GDP. Trump is heading in that direction.

At a meeting in Paris on Dec. 7, Trump said he wants to see Ukraine emerge as a strong and well-armed country. He wants European soldiers, rather than Americans, to be present in Ukraine after a cease-fire as peacekeepers and to bear most of the expense of the continued

deterrence of Russia. This will free the United States to better deter China's communist regime.

Trump wants Europe to help pressure China, including with tariffs, to, in turn, pressure Russia to come to the bargaining table. China has a more powerful economy and conventional military compared to Russia. After North Korea sent troops to fight Ukraine, some, like JP Morgan CEO [Jamie Dimon](#), said that World War III had already started. Others say Russia wants to expand to at least the boundaries of the old Soviet Union. After conquering Ukraine, the Russian army could try to take the Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—all of which are now NATO members. Moscow has already stepped up its espionage in these regions and beyond, from Mexico to the Arctic. Some of it targets the United States.

[NATO](#) chief Mark Rutte warned on Dec. 12 that the West is “not ready” for an increasing Russian threat over the next five years, which includes a long-term goal of conflict with the West.

“It is time to shift to a wartime mindset, and turbocharge our defense production and defense spending,” he said.

Rutte had [praised](#) Trump's first term for getting NATO countries to increase their defense expenditures.

Now, Trump is doing it again. He has reiterated his intention to withdraw the United States from NATO if other countries do not reach defense spending of at least 2 percent of their GDP. He could reasonably increase that demand to 3 percent and add another penalty: tariffs for those that fall below the agreed level. These tariffs could focus on luxuries and replaceables so as not to disrupt more important U.S. supply lines.

European leaders are beginning to take action and will likely fund any U.S. shortfall to keep the Russian army further away from European capitals. Rutte has called for an increase in the defense spending goal among NATO members. Many [NATO countries](#)—namely Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Croatia, and Canada—pay

less than 2 percent of GDP, while several countries, including the United States, Poland, and the Baltics, spend more than 3 percent.

The United States spent 41 percent of GDP on defense at the height of World War II and 10 percent during the Cold War. It was a lot of money, but our freedom was worth the expense. For those countries looking to get a free ride, Trump should apply his signature tariffs. He has threatened Canada with tariffs and could do so as a penalty for its low defense spending. That strategy could also be extended to other NATO countries that shirk their commitments.

Our strong U.S. economy is in part because people around the world see the United States as not only victorious against our most dangerous enemies but also as a nation with a free-market democratic system as something that they trust, want to emulate, and in which they want to invest. After World War II, that impressive soft power made countries agree to choose New York and Washington as the headquarters of the world's most important international institutions. But costly wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have made most Americans rethink our role as the only "world's policeman" who makes the world safe for democracy. At the very least, we also want our allies to shoulder their fair share.

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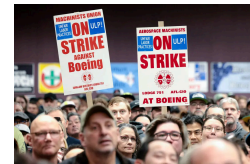
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