

THE POLITICS OF 2 PERCENT: NATO AND THE SECURITY VACUUM IN EUROPE

JAN TECHAU

The members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) pledged in 2014 to increase their defense spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic products by 2024. It is unrealistic to assume that this goal will ever be reached by all 28 allies, and yet the 2 percent metric persists—and it has assumed a significance beyond its face value. It is about addressing Europe's growing security vacuum and defining who will be in charge of European security.

2 Percent and European Security

- The reduction of the U.S. security footprint in Europe and Europeans' dramatic loss of military capability since the 1990s have created a security vacuum in Europe. NATO's 2 percent metric is one instrument to address that.
- As a way to measure an increase in military capability, the 2 percent metric is barely useful. It does not measure spending in real terms or actual output.
- The target has had some success in stimulating debate on European security.
- It has become an important gauge of who is and who is not politically committed to NATO's core task: Europe's security.
- Europeans underestimate the political significance of 2 percent in the U.S. debate over security commitments to Europe.
- Americans overestimate the political significance of 2 percent among Europeans struggling with austerity and divergent threat perceptions, which make it difficult to increase their defense commitments.

Conclusions

- Despite its conceptual flaws, the 2 percent metric will remain the tool of choice in the debate over military spending in NATO. A smarter yardstick would produce a more sophisticated picture of reality but would not have the same political impact.
- The real debate would focus less on spending and more on the widening transatlantic divide over security in Europe. The question of who will guarantee Europe's security in light of global strategic shifts remains unanswered.
- Europe will be forced to step up its defense capabilities in the future if it wants to deal with the myriad threats in its neighborhood. This includes more and smarter defense spending, more defense cooperation, more shared threat assessments, and more leadership by hitherto reluctant nations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Techau is the director of Carnegie Europe, the European center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Techau works on EU integration and foreign policy, transatlantic affairs, and German foreign and security policy.

CONTACT

Christine Lynch
Communications Director
+32 2 209 29 93
clynch@ceip.org

CarnegieEurope.eu

 [@Carnegie_Europe](https://twitter.com/Carnegie_Europe)

 [facebook.com/
CarnegieEurope](https://facebook.com/CarnegieEurope)

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2015 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.