

The Morning: A turning point in military spending

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The New York Times

The Morning

July 12, 2023



By [David Leonhardt](#)

Good morning. We’re covering a debate over military spending, extreme weather and art protests.



NATO’s Saber Strike exercises in Lithuania, in 2015. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Arsenal of democracies

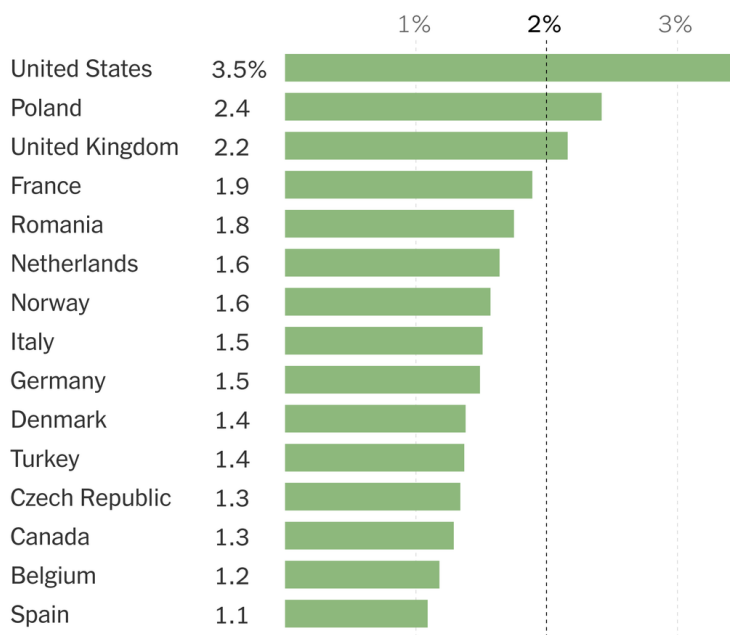
NATO countries have been promising to spend more money on defense for many years.

In 2006, the defense ministers of NATO adopted a vague guideline suggesting that every NATO country spend 2 percent of its annual economic output on the military. At the time, most NATO members spent far less — and [little changed](#) after the 2006 announcement.

In 2014, worried by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, NATO's heads of state formalized the benchmark and urged countries to move toward it within the next decade. Still, most countries have failed to meet it:

Military spending in largest NATO economies in 2022

Estimated percentages of each country's G.D.P.



Source: NATO | Numbers are rounded to the nearest decimal. | By The New York Times

Much of Western Europe has been especially reluctant to do so, to the frustration of leaders in the U.S. and Eastern Europe. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama complained about the gap during their presidencies, and Donald Trump castigated other countries about it. Wealthy countries like Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands — as well as Japan — seemed to be free riders, able to spend more on their own social safety nets while the U.S. protected them.

But now the situation [really does seem to be changing](#).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year has led to a new willingness for countries to pay for their own defense. "It's clearly a turning point for Europe in terms of the allocation of spending between military needs and social spending," said Patricia Cohen, a Times economics correspondent based in London. Liz Alderman, a correspondent based in Paris, put it this way: "European leaders have decided that the threat is here to stay."

Germany appears likely [to meet the 2 percent threshold](#) next year. In France, which was already close to the target, President Emmanuel Macron has promised to lift military spending by more than a third this decade. Other countries are also spending more.

“Incomplete is the grade, but the direction of travel is positive,” Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, told me on Friday, before leaving for this week’s NATO meeting in Lithuania. At the meeting, American officials plan to push other countries not to stop at 2 percent. “Two percent should not be seen as a ceiling to hit, but really a floor that should be built upon,” Sullivan said.

‘Remarkably sanguine’



A German anti-aircraft cannon tank. Felix Schmitt for The New York Times

The arguments for more military spending involve both fairness and democracy.

The fairness point is the same one that Bush, Obama and Trump have made: At a time when many Americans are frustrated with slow-growing living standards and the U.S. has a \$32 trillion federal debt, why should Western Europe effectively bill Washington for protection? And why should richer NATO countries like Germany be less willing to pay for defense than Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Greece and Poland (all of which have hit the 2 percent target)?

The democracy point is related to a major theme of Biden’s foreign policy. Global affairs are increasingly defined by [a contest between autocracy and democracy](#), Biden has said. On one side are Russia and China. On the other are the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia and much of Europe. Democracy will be more likely to prevail if countries share the burdens of military spending.

Japan’s leaders seem to agree with this idea. Historically, Japan spent only about 1 percent of its economic output on the military — a legacy of its post-World War II desire to avoid belligerence, as was also the case for Germany. But starting in 2012, Shinzo Abe, then the prime minister, began pushing for a new approach, one that he argued was more fitting for modern realities.

Initially, the Japanese public was skeptical. In 2015, people took to the streets to protest a law that allowed Japanese troops to participate in some combat missions, notes Motoko Rich, The Times’s Tokyo bureau chief.

Today, people seem more supportive. Japan's current prime minister, Fumio Kishida, plans [to raise defense spending](#) gradually to 2 percent of economic output, and the public reaction has been "remarkably sanguine," Motoko says. The new aggressiveness of China and nuclear tests by North Korea help explain the shift.

There are trade-offs, of course. The additional money that countries spend on defense is money they cannot spend on roads, child care, cancer research, refugee resettlement, public parks or clean energy, my colleague Patricia points out. One reason Macron has insisted on raising France's retirement age despite widespread protests, analysts believe, is a need to leave more money for the military.

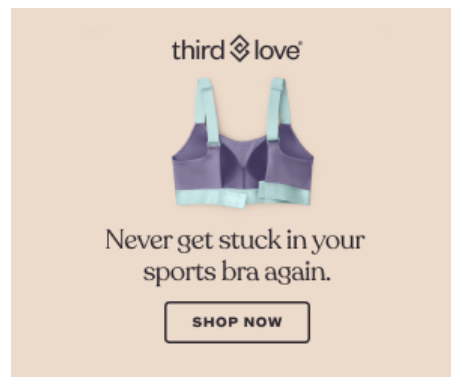
But the situation over the past few decades feels unsustainable. Some of the world's richest countries were able to spend so much on social programs partly because another country — the U.S. — was paying for their defense. Those other countries, sensing a more threatening world, are now once again promising to pull their weight. They still need to demonstrate that they'll follow through this time.

Related: Right-wing Republicans [want to use the annual defense bill](#) to pick abortion fights and combat "wokeness" in the military.

More on NATO

- NATO said it planned to allow Ukraine to [join the alliance eventually](#), but leaders refused to offer a clear timetable. [Here's what they promised.](#)
- The statement was a win for Biden, who said before the summit that Ukraine was not ready to be a member. He is expected to [meet with Volodymyr Zelensky](#) today.
- By changing his position on Sweden's membership, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's leader, could be trying to [repair relations with Washington](#).

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THE LATEST NEWS

Northeast Floods



Kayaking in downtown Montpelier, Vt. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

- Heavy rains [flooded the streets](#) of Vermont's capital, Montpelier, but some of the water has started to recede.
- Vermont's governor said he had to hike to work because the roads around his home were impassable.
- These maps show [how much rain has fallen across New England](#).
- As climate change has intensified rainstorms, more parts of the U.S. are [vulnerable to flooding](#).

Heat

- A [marine heat wave in the Gulf of Mexico](#) is pushing water temperatures into the 90s, threatening coral and other sea life.
- Arizona had its 11th straight day of 110-degree temperatures. The heat is [forecast to continue](#).

Business

- A judge rejected the F.T.C.'s attempt to delay the merger of [Microsoft and Activision Blizzard](#), essentially ending the government's effort to block the deal.
- Regulators fined Bank of America [\\$150 million over junk fees](#) like double-charging its customers for overdrafts.
- Threads, Meta's Twitter competitor, found overnight success with its built-in audience. But its [growth may not last](#), Mike Isaac writes.

Politics

- Donald Trump's lawyers asked the judge in the classified documents case to [postpone the trial indefinitely](#).
- Gal Luft, once hailed as a key witness in House Republicans' Hunter Biden investigation, was [charged with trafficking weapons](#) between China and the Middle East.

Abortion

- The Iowa Senate approved legislation that would [ban abortions after six weeks](#).
- A Nebraska woman [pleaded guilty](#) to giving her 17-year-old daughter pills for an illegal abortion and helping to burn and bury the fetus, The Associated Press reported.

Other Big Stories

- Milan Kundera, the Czech-French author of "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" and a Communist Party outcast, [died at 94](#).
- Chinese hackers intent on collecting U.S. intelligence [gained access to government email accounts](#) and went undetected for a month, Microsoft said.
- Covid [probably spread among deer](#) and may have been passed back to people after mutating in the animals.
- Leslie Van Houten, a Manson family member convicted of murder in the group's 1969 killing spree, [was released on parole](#).

Opinions

Cambodia's propaganda campaigns on Facebook [exploit a neglected area](#) in content moderation: foreign languages, **Samuel Woolley** argues.

Here is a column by **Paul Krugman** on ["lazy" workers](#).

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MORNING READS



New York City. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times

Daddy's little meatball: [A New York shirt](#) loved by both tourists and locals.

Hair loss: It [may be linked to stress](#).

It's never too late: To [become a nurse](#).

Lives Lived: Ruth Fitzpatrick was a crusader for letting women be Roman Catholic priests. She [died at 90](#).

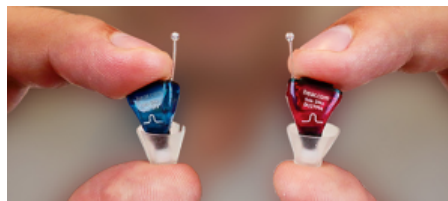
SPORTS NEWS

Golf: PGA Tour executives [testified at a Senate hearing](#) yesterday regarding the organization's pending agreement with the Saudi Public Investment Fund.

Wimbledon: Ukraine's [Elina Svitolina upset the No. 1-ranked Iga Swiatek](#) to reach the semifinals. "War made me stronger," Svitolina said.

New rules: The N.B.A. has [officially banned flopping](#), one of two changes implemented by the league yesterday.

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ARTS AND IDEAS



Activists splashed oil on a Gustav Klimt painting protected by glass. Letzte Generation Oesterreich, via Associated Press

Art and activism: Climate activists have vandalized art at more than a dozen museums as acts of protest over the past year, often smearing liquids across famous works. “No art on a dead planet,” read signs at a recent demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But while corporations and politicians are the focus of the activists’ anger, [museums shoulder the costs of the protests](#), Zachary Small writes. Institutions have hired extra security, installed barriers and paid for cleanups of soup-splattered masterpieces.

More on culture

- Hollywood actors [may soon join screenwriters on strike](#). Like the writers, they want higher wages and guardrails on A.I.
- A dispute over two handwritten wills divided Aretha Franklin’s family for years. A jury ruled that the [more recent will](#), found under a couch cushion, was binding.
- A trans woman has been crowned Miss Netherlands [for the first time](#).

THE MORNING RECOMMENDS ...



David Malosh for The New York Times

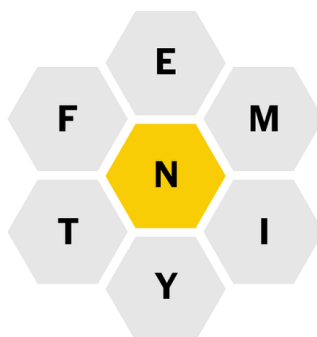
Mix this [Thai-style vegetable salad](#).

Find the best Amazon Prime Day [deals under \\$100](#).

Use [the best bath towels](#).

Read a John le Carré novel. [Here's a guide to find the right one](#).

GAMES



Here are [today's Spelling Bee](#) and [the Bee Buddy](#), which helps you find remaining words. Yesterday's pangram was *beatific*.

And here are [today's Mini Crossword](#), [Wordle](#) and [Sudoku](#).

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. — David

Correction: Yesterday's newsletter incorrectly stated the name of a city where a landslide occurred in Southern California. It was in Rolling Hills Estates, not Palos Verdes.

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