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# Timid allies

The Reagan administration's response to the current Persian Gulf crisis has been, like all its other recent efforts in the Middle East, dead wrong.

Reacting to the increasing attacks on oil tankers by both Iran and Iraq, the U.S. has offered to send warplanes to protect shipping in the Gulf. Everyone has blithely accepted Washington's contention that such an offer wisely protects American vital interests. But whose vital interests are really involved there?

America imports 49% of its total oil needs; 34% of this amount comes from the Gulf. Only 8% of total U.S. energy requirements come from the Gulf. In sharp contrast, Western Europe imports 96% of its petroleum; 61% comes from the Gulf. Japan imports 100% of its oil and 72% of this amount comes through the Gulf.

These statistics clearly show that Gulf oil is of vital importance to Western Europe and Japan, but of very limited significance to the American economy. What is Europe doing about the increasing threat to its petroleum jugular vein?

France and Britain are keeping a few destroyers and frigates on station at the mouth of the Gulf in company with a larger U.S. carrier battle group. Other European oil importers — Italy, West Germany, Spain and Scandinavia — are doing nothing.

Why should the U.S. have to send aircraft and ships to the Gulf, at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, in order to protect Europe's oil supply? By doing so, the U.S. runs the risk of a confrontation with the USSR or direct embroilment in the Iran-Iraq war.

Americans have been complaining for decades that Europe is not assuming its fair share of defence spending. This is absolutely true: European members of NATO spend an average of 3.5% of gross national product (GNP) on defence while the U.S. spends 7.5%.

### Administer shock therapy

Here is a perfect opportunity for Washington to administer much-needed shock therapy to its diffident European allies. Reagan should tell the Europeans to go defend their own oil and stop relying on U.S. taxpayers. It is also the moment for the U.S. to remind Europe of its recent billion-dollar deal to buy Russian natural gas. European governments ignored American protests over this agreement which will greatly strengthen the Soviet economy.

Fine, if Europe wants to assert its independence of action by purchasing Russian natural gas, then let it also act independently to protect its Middle Eastern supplies.

Japan is an even more flagrant example of shirking the free world's defence responsibilities. In spite of its enormous wealth, Japan still only spends 1% of GNP on defence. The Japanese take refuge behind their constitution which prohibits the creation of offensive military forces. Instead of spending money on defence, the Japanese government pours billions into technology and support of exporting industries. For real protection, Japan relies on the United States.

If the Gulf were truly shut down, within five months the lights in Western Europe and Japan would begin to grow dim. Perhaps it is this sort of shock therapy that would be necessary to make Europeans and Japanese realize that they must begin spending adequate sums on the defence of their interests.

Neutral Sweden offers us an interesting example of the benefits of a dose of cold reality. Until the recent massive intrusions into Swedish coastal waters by Russian submarines and frogmen, the leftish Swedes were cutting defence spending. Now, clearly alarmed by these blatant intrusions, Sweden is significantly increasing its anti-submarine forces. The Swedish public demanded that its government take action.

### Protecting vital interests

Similarly, a widespread oil shortage in Western Europe could well serve to educate the European public to the necessity of protecting its vital energy interests. Even with their inadequate level of defence spending, Europeans have today ample military force to mount an intervention in the Gulf. Such an operation would be far more acceptable to both the Arabs and the Russians than the deployment of U.S. forces in Arabia.

Economic security is not the only issue. Europe has lately shown a dismal weakness of will, a profound reluctance to risk the good life of the welfare state in order to stand up to Russia's growing assertiveness. It is certainly high time that Europe start demonstrating some strength and purpose. If Europeans will not bestir themselves to defend their oil supplies, will they do anything to protect their borders or democratic systems?

With these sombre thoughts in mind, President Reagan has a remarkable and quite unexpected opportunity to inject some mettle into our faint-hearted allies. He should privately tell them: "Get your own military forces to the Gulf, do what is right, and we will support you." At the same time, Reagan should also go on record by committing the U.S. to the defence of Saudi Arabia — which is a true vital interest of the U.S. But there is a large difference between defending the Saudis and protecting Europe's oil shipments.

Europeans complain that the U.S. invariably fails to recognize their wisdom, maturity and independence. Let them prove these attributes by taking some real action. Make the Japanese start defending their oil supplies instead of devising new ways to dump Toyotas in the U.S.

For once, President Reagan should get tough with his listless allies, instead of the Russians who have very little to do with the current Gulf crisis. Unfortunately, he appears to be only encouraging Europe's and Japan's flight from reality.

*(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)*