

June 17, 2026

Europe to NATO: Do As I Say, Not As I Do

When alliance members condemn you for acting and decline to help you when you need it, deterrence doesn't survive the contradiction.

NATO's strength has never rested primarily on military hardware or treaty language. Its real power comes from the political behavior of its members — their willingness to act like allies when it matters. That means aligning publicly, supporting one another in moments of crisis, and performing unity in a way that reinforces deterrence. Performance, in this context, is not a pejorative. It is the mechanism by which alliances communicate credibility to adversaries.

But performance only works when it reflects practice. When the performance of alliance solidarity diverges from the practice of it — when the press releases signal unity while the political behavior signals division — adversaries notice. They are watching for exactly that gap. And Europe has been giving them a clear view.

The EU's response to U.S. action in Iran was not principled diplomacy. It was the performance of principle — public condemnation, moralistic language, calls for restraint directed at Washington rather than the adversary, and political distancing calibrated for domestic audiences rather than strategic effect. Several NATO members refused to provide even minimal assistance or political cover. Article 5 was not invoked, so no treaty obligation was violated. But NATO's credibility does not rest on treaty obligations alone. It rests on the belief that allies will not hesitate. Hesitation is a message. The message Europe sent was unmistakable: we will condemn you when you act and decline to help you when you need it.

This is not a question of policy disagreement. Allies disagree all the time. This is a question of whether Europe still understands what an alliance is for. NATO exists for one purpose: collective defense. Its deterrence is psychological. It works because adversaries believe the alliance will not fracture under pressure. When European governments contradict NATO messaging and perform division for domestic political gain, they are not expressing independent judgment. They are degrading the deterrence architecture that protects them.

The EU's institutional culture has made this worse. Brussels increasingly behaves as if its role is to pass moral judgment on the actions of its own allies. Commissioners, foreign ministers, and parliamentary blocs compete to issue the most principled statements regardless of strategic consequences. This is not diplomacy. It is a performance economy operating inside an alliance that cannot afford one. The incentive structure rewards moral grandstanding. The cost is borne by NATO's credibility — and ultimately by the European citizens whose security depends on it.

The structural asymmetry is not sustainable. Europe relies on the United States for nuclear deterrence, strategic lift, intelligence, missile defense, command and control, and rapid deployment capability. When the U.S. acts to maintain that deterrence, Europe responds with criticism rather than solidarity. The U.S. provides the security. Europe provides the judgment.

NATO absorbs the contradiction. An alliance cannot function indefinitely when one side carries the burden and the other carries the microphone.

NATO is not a stage for moral theater. It is a security guarantee. And security guarantees collapse when members treat them as optional — when the performance of alliance membership substitutes for the practice of it. If Europe wants NATO to endure, it must recover the basic discipline of alliance politics: solidarity is not a preference, deterrence is not a default, and the gap between what you say and what you do is precisely what adversaries are measuring.

They have a word for it. So does every child who has ever been told to do as I say, not as I do.

J. Ken Rhodes

jkenrhodes@yahoo.com • 386-295-9294

Mr. Rhodes spent his career in private equity, capital markets, and financial regulation, including service as Chief of Securities for the State of Tennessee and membership on the Regulation D drafting committee. He holds a Master's degree in Economics and writes independently on strategic competition and institutional architecture.