

US demands greater European military spending at NATO summit

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17 February 2017

The two-day NATO summit in Brussels that concluded yesterday began with a threat by president Donald Trump's Defence Secretary James Mattis that the US would "moderate its commitment" if its European allies did not hike up their military spending.

It ended with a press conference at which NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg announced a ramping up of military deployments in the states bordering Russia, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Stoltenberg told the media, "Troops have started to arrive. And we expect the four multinational battle groups to be fully operational by June... they send a clear message to any potential aggressor."

"Complementing our strengthened regional posture in the air and on land—based on a multinational framework brigade in Romania," he added, NATO's naval forces were being strengthened in the Black Sea region.

This was proof, he said, that "Allies stand together, united and strong."

In response to questions, Stoltenberg stressed a desire for "dialogue" with Russia, but only based on "core principles" including the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the delivering of what he euphemistically called "credible deterrence."

Mattis was attending the summit to reiterate the demand made last month by Trump that the European powers step up their defence spending to meet the target of two percent of GDP to which they are pledged. In an interview where he declared the alliance to be "obsolete" and suggested friendlier bilateral relations with Russia, Trump also declared support for Britain's decision to leave the European Union and spoke favourably of the break-up of a "vehicle for Germany."

The Europeans were therefore said to be cautiously pleased that Trump's National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn, had resigned and is subject to an investigation by US counterintelligence officials for holding secret

conversations with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak regarding the lifting of sanctions over alleged Russian hacking in the 2016 US elections.

Mattis led an earlier investigation into then-Lt Gen Flynn that found him responsible for the unauthorised disclosures of classified information to Afghanistan—believed to be about CIA operations—and himself takes a hard-line anti-Russia stand. However, he combined a hard-line position on Russia with an equally belligerent approach to America's NATO allies—even accusing them of not doing enough to combat Russia.

After first making reassuring public noises about NATO being "a fundamental bedrock for the United States," he made more critical remarks during closed-door talks that were then circulated publicly by US officials.

Mattis accused "Some in this alliance" of having "looked away in denial of what is happening" by ignoring threats from Russia and Islamic State (Isis).

"America will meet its responsibilities, but if your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this Alliance, each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defence," he threatened.

"No longer can the American taxpayer carry a disproportionate share of the defence of Western values," he continued. "Americans cannot care more for your children's security than you do. Disregard for military readiness demonstrates a lack of respect for ourselves, for the alliance and for the freedoms we inherited, which are now clearly threatened."

The conflict between the US and Europe over military spending is a real one.

Last year, NATO's European powers spent \$253 billion on defence, an average of 1.43 percent of GDP, compared with at least \$618 billion by the US, or 3.1 percent of GDP. Military spending is now increasing for the first time in many years, with the Western European powers pledged to boost defence budgets by about \$10 billion. To

meet the two percent target would require an increase of around \$100 billion and far more if there were a return to the 3.1 percent of GDP average during the last years of the Cold War.

But the bitter row over who pays what should not be allowed to obscure the underlying significance of demands for increased defence spending whether they are made in the US or Europe. It is the fundamental conflict between rival imperialist powers for the control of global markets and resources that finds expression in the fallout within NATO. And as Stoltenberg made clear in his press conference, this means that the purchase of additional military hardware and the recruitment of personnel is preparation for war, not preserving “peace” and “security.”

Mattis’s demands were dutifully echoed by UK Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon, who insisted that NATO members must all “meet their fair share of the burden by increasing their expenditure to 2 percent” so as to make the alliance “more agile and more responsive.”

The UK boasts of being one of the five NATO countries to meet the two percent target along with the US, Poland, Greece and Estonia, and the Conservative government offered its services as an attack dog on the issue when Prime Minister Theresa May met Trump last month in Washington. The Labour opposition for its part focuses its ire on allegations that the government has met the target only by creative accounting, with Shadow Defence Secretary Nia Griffith declaring immediately prior to the summit that “To be spending less than two percent of GDP on defence is utterly unacceptable, particularly in this time of immense global uncertainty.”

More strikingly, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen also welcomed Mattis’s intervention as it provided a convenient rationale for implementing existing plans to step up military spending. Berlin’s spending presently stands at just 1.2 percent of GDP, primarily due to constraints placed on German imperialism by widespread public hostility to militarism. This would need to increase by \$30 billion just to reach the two percent target.

This would require a massive offensive against the living standards of German workers, as similar increases in military spending would in every European country.

For this reason, von der Leyen happily expressed sympathy with Mattis and insisted that “We Europeans, we Germans, we have to do more for our own security, we have to invest more there.”

In an article published Thursday in the *Süddeutsche*

Zeitung under the title “We have understood,” she called upon Europe to take a leadership role within NATO and boasted that Germany “has taken the initiative in matters of security policy in the past years” regarding Ukraine, the military build-up against Russia and interventions in the Middle East and Africa, and will “continue on this way.”

At present, the European powers are seeking a new accommodation with the US, centred above all on a mutual targeting of Russia and efforts to militarily stabilise the oil-rich Middle East. Carnegie Europe wrote of a “geostrategically assertive Russia” and “the accelerating threat of Islamic terrorism” providing “a unique opportunity for NATO to align the security outlooks of key European members with that of the United States.”

Putin himself noted, “At the NATO summit last July in Warsaw for the first time since 1989, Russia was recognized as the key security threat for the alliance, and its deterrence was officially proclaimed the new NATO mission. To this end, a further enlargement of the bloc is conducted”—citing as proof of NATO’s eastward expansion, Montenegro, Georgia and Ukraine seeking membership in the alliance.

However, it remains to be seen for how long the competing global interests of the American and European imperialists can be constrained within the post-war framework provided by NATO. On the last day of the summit, defence ministers from France, Germany, Belgium and Norway announced in a letter of intent that they will now jointly buy transport and tanker planes and will aim to open a new command headquarters for elite troops, in a move described by CNBC as designed to end “years of competing national strategies that have left Europe reliant on the United States.”



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