

US-European tensions remain despite reassurances on NATO

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A series of speeches by top American officials at this year's Munich Security Summit has failed to assuage growing concerns within European ruling circles that the "America First" policy enunciated by President Donald Trump will be pursued at their expense, threatening an accelerated breakup of institutions and alliances that have undergirded capitalist Europe since the end of the Second World War.

US Vice President Michael Pence delivered the main message from Washington to the conference, which brings together leading state officials, top military personnel, security experts and big business figures for what has long been seen as a candid discussion of challenges facing the US-dominated transatlantic alliance.

For the first time in the 62 years since the first of these annual gatherings, the greatest threat to stability is seen as emanating from Washington. These concerns stem from Trump's advocacy of a unilateralist and nationalist foreign policy, combined with his statements dismissing NATO as "obsolete," suggesting a unilateral lifting of Russia's sanctions and supporting Brexit, while encouraging other countries to follow Britain's example in defecting from a European Union that he contemptuously referred to as the "consortium."

In his remarks to the gathering on Saturday, Pence delivered a rhetorical pledge of allegiance to the NATO alliance, while mentioning the name "Trump" a dozen times. He repeatedly assured his audience that he was speaking on behalf of the American president, in evident anticipation of intense skepticism that anyone in Washington can spell out the real foreign policy of the new administration.

The US would be "unwavering" in its support for NATO, Pence declared, and Donald Trump would "stand with Europe." He added, "Know this: The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable," even as the Trump administration seeks "common ground" with

Moscow.

After his remarks, Pence met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and, according to a White House statement, "underlined that the United States does not recognize Russia's occupation and attempted annexation of the Crimean peninsula," which rejoined Russia following a popular referendum held in the wake of the Western-orchestrated right-wing coup in Kiev in 2014.

Pence's statement regarding Russia followed similar remarks last week by Trump's defense secretary, former Marine General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, who ruled out any military collaboration with Russia until Moscow "proves itself" regarding Ukraine and Crimea.

Even more bellicose were members of a bipartisan congressional delegation present in Munich. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said on Sunday that "2017 is going to be a year of kicking Russian ass in Congress," and vowed that Congress would pass new rounds of sanctions against both Russia and Iran. Senator Christopher Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut who spoke on the same panel as Graham in Munich, said there would be no "partisan divide" on the push for redoubled sanctions.

Whatever differences have surfaced between the Trump administration and Washington's NATO allies over Russia—not to mention the bitter internecine struggle in Washington over the issue—the US-NATO build-up continues with the deployment of some 4,000 US troops to Eastern Europe, while the remarks in Munich suggest that no lifting of US sanctions against Moscow are imminent.

Present in Munich for Pence's remarks to the conference, Konstantin Kosachyov, the head of Russia's parliamentary foreign affairs committee, responded: "I heard nothing in the speech. The new American leaders have started to reproduce the negatives accumulated under the previous administration."

Much of Pence's speech was given over to a celebration of American militarism and vows that under Trump the US build-up to war would undergo a dramatic acceleration.

"I can assure you that the United States will be strong, stronger than ever before," said the vice president. "We will strengthen our military, restore the arsenal of democracy and, working with many members of congress gathered here today, we're going to provide soldiers, sailors, airmen and coast guard with renewed resources to defend our nation and our treaty allies from the threats of today and unknown threats of tomorrow."

At the same time, Pence, echoing earlier remarks by Defense Secretary Mattis, chided European NATO members for failing to pay their "fair share" to fund the US-led alliance. He charged that "some of our largest allies"—an apparent dig at Germany—were not "on track" to meeting a commitment to devote 2 percent of their GDP to military spending.

In her own defensive remarks to the Munich conference, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel stressed the importance of multilateral institutions and insisted that NATO was as much "in the American interest" as it was in Germany's or Europe's. In relation to the demand that Germany boost its military spending to 2 percent of GDP—nearly a doubling of the current military budget—Merkel said, "We will do everything we can to fulfill these commitments."

Responding to a question after her speech, Merkel pointed out that Germany is increasing its military spending by 8 percent this year and pleaded that "we cannot do more...Money has to be absorbed somehow [from the national budget]." Her remark reflected the fact that the German ruling establishment faces overwhelming popular hostility to the country's military buildup, and that the cost of it will have to be imposed on the German working class through draconian cuts in social spending and living standards.

Both Merkel and German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel suggested that Germany's spending on refugees and social development should be counted toward NATO's 2 percent mandate.

Elsewhere, however, the demand from Washington for Germany's remilitarization has been welcomed. In its February 18 edition, Germany's *Der Spiegel* carried an editorial declaring "Donald Trump is right" about Germany's military spending.

"The era in European history when the Continent could delegate its security to a partner across the Atlantic has

passed, irrevocably. That will remain true even after Trump is no longer in the White House," the editorial states, declaring Trump "a symptom of the crisis in the West, not its cause."

It continues by warning that it would be "reckless and naïve if Europe were not to prepare for the fact that it can no longer unconditionally rely on the United States."

The editorial calls for Europe to "massively expand the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy," adding that "the idea of Europe being a junior partner could finally be consigned to the dustbin of history and lead Europe to begin defining its own interests." Finally, the editorial allowed that Germany does not necessarily have to develop its own nuclear weapons, if it can develop "a level of trust in the nuclear power of France."

One notable feature of Vice President Pence's speech was that, while it included multiple vows of support for NATO, it made not a single mention of the European Union, which some in Munich took as a warning that Washington is embarking on an aggressive pursuit of US imperialist interests at Europe's expense.

Wolfgang Ischinger, the former German ambassador to Washington who chairs the Munich Security Conference, told *Deutsche Welle* that if the Trump administration continued to take a hostile attitude to the EU, "it would amount to a kind of nonmilitary declaration of war. It would mean conflict between Europe and the United States. Is that what the US wants? Is that how he wishes to make America great again?"

It was Ischinger who drafted the report issued at the opening of the Munich conference. It warned that the international situation is "arguably more volatile today than at any point since World War II" and went on to ask, "Will this new era again be marked by greater tensions and, possibly, even outright conflict between the world's major powers, not least between China and the US?" Given the issues that dominated the conference, the same question clearly applies to Europe and America.



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