

Trump to press for increased defence spending at NATO summit

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25 May 2017

As part of his first foreign trip as US president, Donald Trump will participate in Thursday's NATO meeting in Brussels, before traveling to the G7 summit in Sicily over the weekend.

Trump's visit takes place in the context of a deep political, economic and social crisis, to which the ruling classes on both sides of the Atlantic are responding with a sharp shift to the right. While the multi-billionaire US president is slashing social spending in the US, initiating a massive military build-up and trampling democratic rights under foot, the European heads of government are seeking to do the same.

In France, the Elysee Palace announced Wednesday after a meeting of the security cabinet that the state of emergency would be extended under newly-elected President Emmanuel Macron until November. In Britain, following the terrorist attack in Manchester, military units have been mobilised to back up the police, and in Germany the main parties are preparing a law-and-order election campaign, the centrepiece of which will be the strengthening of the state apparatus and militarism.

The summit will follow a morning meeting between Trump, European Union (EU) Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk. The US president was welcomed to the Vatican Wednesday by Pope Francis for a 20-minute private audience.

The main issue at the NATO meeting will be the implementation of an agreement from a 2014 summit in Wales, at which the NATO members agreed to increase defence spending by 2024 to 2 percent of GDP.

Under pressure above all from the US government, this agreement is now to be concretised. According to a report in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a paper has been prepared which calls for the

presentation of annual progress reports. In these reports, each member state must demonstrate at the end of the year how they intend to move towards the agreed NATO goal in the following year. In addition, the reports will deal with the three Cs: "cash, capabilities, contributions" — "i.e. how much money is being allocated to defence, the capabilities each military has, and what it contributes to NATO missions and tasks."

The US' second demand, which could provoke sharp conflicts at the meeting, is NATO's contribution to the war against terrorism, according to the newspaper. The US wants NATO to formally join the US-led coalition against the Islamic State. Although all NATO members are part of the coalition, Paris and Berlin have thus far resisted calls for the alliance as a whole to formally take part in the military intervention.

A few months ago, Trump was still describing NATO as "obsolete" and demanding that Germany pay the US "more for its powerful and costly defence." Now he wants the European powers to rearm and participate more strongly than before in the US-led wars in the Middle East. At the same time, he wants to prevent them from developing their own independent military structures, so as to pursue their geostrategic and economic interests in opposition to Washington.

Germany is working systematically on this goal. In a comment entitled "We have understood," Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (CDU) promised in early February the increasing of Germany's defence budget. At the same time, Berlin has pursued the goal of expanding the military weight of Germany and Europe internationally by establishing a European army.

The concrete plan involves the transforming of the German army into an "anchor army" for European NATO states, the arming of these states and their

gradual subordination to the command structures of the German army. It was necessary to think “once again in terms of bigger units,” according to Von der Leyen.

Since the election of Macron, who is strongly oriented towards Berlin, the plans for a joint European defence policy have been rapidly advanced. At last Thursday’s meeting of EU interior and defence ministers in Brussels, the EU states agreed to the creation of a joint command centre for civilian and military operations. Initially, it will be used to direct EU training missions in Mali and Somalia.

According to EU foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini, a framework was also agreed for so-called “permanent structured cooperation,” and “financial barriers for the deployment of EU battlegroups” were overcome. In addition, 19 EU states, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, are planning to create a joint arms budget next year.

In this context, Mogherini complained that although the EU invests about half as much in defence as the US, it achieves only 15 percent of its “capabilities” and industrial production. At the same time, she referred to the “great potential” of the EU, which even after the exit of Britain would still control “the second largest defence budget in the world.”

A sharp conflict between Germany and the US could once again break out at the NATO meeting. Significantly, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democrats, SPD), who already clashed with his American colleague Rex Tillerson at the last NATO foreign ministers’ meeting, criticised the call for an increase in defence spending to 2 percent of GDP. It is not possible to “achieve peace through military spending alone,” Gabriel said, adding he would “have no idea what we would spend the money on.”

Gabriel’s statements have nothing to do with pacifism. The foreign minister left no doubt about his support for the massive rearmament of the German army agreed to by his predecessor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, at the 2014 Wales summit. The army would be better equipped, and this was urgently necessary, stated Gabriel. But the US announcement that it intended to achieve higher military spending by cutting development aid was “certainly the wrong way” to go about it.

The SPD’s message is clear: Germany is rearming and preparing an expansion of military interventions,

but to enforce its own imperialist interests in conflict with the other major powers.

Martin Schulz, the SPD’s candidate for chancellor, warned in the wake of the latest multi-billion dollar arms deal negotiated by Trump between the US and Saudi Arabia of a dangerous arms race in the Middle East. “If there is too much of something in the Persian Gulf, it is weapons. Instead, we need a new security architecture,” the SPD chairman told DPA ahead of the NATO meeting. Europe had to intervene more strongly in the “great power policies of Russia and the US” in the region.

The depth of tensions within NATO is further underscored by the conflict between Germany and Turkey. After Ankara prevented German parliamentary deputies from visiting approximately 260 German troops deployed at the Incirlik air base, Berlin threatened to redeploy them to Jordan. The Turkish government justified its refusal with the claim that Germany offered asylum to Turkish officers accused of participation in the failed July 2016 coup.

During his visit last week to Washington, Gabriel threatened not only to withdraw the Tornado reconnaissance planes from Incirlik, but also the German crews of the NATO “Awacs” reconnaissance planes in Konya. For him, the conflict was “far more than a bilateral problem.” To the Americans, it was “clear what the severe consequences for the struggle against ISIS would be if the German army had to be withdrawn from there,” Gabriel said.



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