

NATO defense ministers meet in Brussels to call for new Middle East wars

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NATO defense ministers began a two-day summit yesterday in Brussels, calling for new military escalation in the Middle East amid the debacle of their eight-year proxy war in Syria.

Since Trump withdrew 1,000 US troops deployed with US-backed Kurdish militias in northeastern Syria two weeks ago, green-lighting a Turkish attack on the Kurdish forces, the situation in Syria has shifted sharply against Washington and its European imperialist allies. Russia, Turkey and the Syrian regime have agreed to a return to the pre-war borders, while allowing Turkey to mount cross-border raids on Kurdish militias. Syrian troops are also massing to attack Al Qaeda-linked militias in northwestern Syria's Idlib province, the last holdout of NATO-backed "rebel" forces.

Reeling from this defeat, the NATO defense ministers could only restate their commitment to waging war across Eurasia, and issue conflicting proposals for further military escalation. While US Defense Secretary Mark Esper proposed further deployments against Iran and China, there was also discussion of German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's call to deploy a European "peacekeeping" force to occupy northeastern Syria, consisting of 30,000 to 40,000 troops.

In a brief public statement before talks began, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg hailed "all NATO's missions and operations, from the Balkans to Afghanistan." He also pledged that he would today press Europe to boost its military spending: "I will once again highlight the importance of burden-sharing, both when it comes to spending, but also contributions and capabilities, and I will prepare a report for the Heads of State and Government when they meet in London in December."

Asked about Kramp-Karrenbauer's proposal, the first German government proposal for aggressive overseas military action since the fall of the Nazi regime, Stoltenberg endorsed it: "I have discussed this proposal

with Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. It is positive that NATO allies, in this case Germany, have proposals and ideas of how we can move forward."

Stoltenberg underlined NATO's preparations for large-scale military action, including the Defender 2020 exercise to test the Pentagon's ability to rapidly transport tens of thousands of US troops from America to Europe and participate in all-out NATO mobilization for war with Russia. The exercise will also have a Pacific component, with provocative naval maneuvers off the Chinese coast, in the South China Sea. However, Stoltenberg declined to immediately speculate about a NATO or European invasion of Syria as proposed by Kramp-Karrenbauer.

Stoltenberg added, "If I started now to speculate about all possible and impossible options, I would only add to the uncertainty... There has been no call for a NATO mission in northeastern Syria."

After yesterday's meeting, Stoltenberg again appeared in the evening to make a terse statement to the press. He noted that there were "differing views" among the countries in the NATO alliance, adding that these were in line with conflicts that are "publicly known." While calling the situation in northeastern Syria "very serious," he said he recognized that "Turkey has legitimate security concerns" in the region and evaded a question from the press whether Turkey would agree to German or European troop deployments to Syria.

While he said that Kramp-Karrenbauer had briefed her fellow NATO defense ministers on Berlin's proposal, Stoltenberg said it would be "wrong" for him to try to summarize it himself.

The military debacle in the Middle East and the deep discrediting of war among workers in the Middle East and in the NATO countries has staggered the alliance. Beyond criticisms voiced by both Washington and the European imperialist powers of Turkey, there are clearly conflicts between the ruling elites of America and Europe, related

to the foreign policy conflicts in the US ruling class underlying the drive to impeach Trump. All the various factions are proposing strategies for military escalation against nuclear-armed powers, however, with disastrous consequences for workers.

While Kramp-Karrenbauer's plan entails NATO launching a confrontation with Russia in Syria, Esper spoke for factions of the American bourgeoisie focused on preparing war firstly with China. "The National Defense Strategy prioritizes China first and Russia second, as we transition our primary focus to great power competition," the US defense secretary said yesterday at a speech to the German Marshall Fund in Brussels.

On this basis, Esper did not mention further wars in Syria, instead calling for the European powers to join the Trump administration's escalation against Iran. Raising the plans to send thousands of US troops to Saudi Arabia as part of a military buildup against Iran, he added: "We urge our allies in Europe to follow our lead and contribute their own support to help deter Iranian aggression, promote stability in the region, and defend the international rules-based order."

In a further sign of the Trump administration's disinterest in waging further war in defense of the Kurds in northeastern Syria, moreover, Trump canceled Wednesday sanctions he had briefly imposed on Turkey for attacking the Kurdish militias.

Kramp-Karrenbauer continued to push ahead with her plan to confront Russia over Syria, however. After she left the defense ministers meeting, she said the support for her plan inside NATO is "very encouraging." However, she added, "It will still be a longer process, and a difficult path."

In the German media, who have campaigned aggressively for German remilitarization for six years, several outlets also wrote that Kramp-Karrenbauer's plan would require time to develop. Her plan, *Merkur* wrote, "did not trigger international enthusiasm—the reactions were restrained. In Brussels she received recognition for her initiative at a NATO defense ministers' meeting. But none of the countries promised definite support."

Munich Security Council president Wolfgang Ischinger told *Der Spiegel* that her plan "presupposes however that all sides pull together on militarily relevant issues. After this, it does not look like it is the situation at the moment."

Indeed, examining Kramp-Karrenbauer's proposal, it appears to be more a call for a military buildup and to whip up a militarist atmosphere inside Germany than a

plan for immediate military action. It is a warning as to the direction of the policy of the European bourgeoisie. Berlin is planning a vast escalation of European and German military capabilities, which would in turn entail massive military spending increases and correspondingly massive attacks on workers across Europe.

Given that deploying NATO troops to wars in Afghanistan or Iraq cost on the order of \$1 million per soldier per year, deploying 40,000 European troops would require an expansion of European military budgets by tens of billions of euros per year. However, whether or not the European powers are capable of independently deploying such a force to Syria and resupply it amid a US retreat from the country, it is unclear what such a force would do.

The coalition that defeated the NATO proxy militias in Syria—allied to Russia and provided with Russian air cover and anti-aircraft missiles—is a formidable force that would decisively outnumber the European force. It includes not only the 200,000 surviving soldiers of the Syrian army and 80,000 allied Syrian irregulars, but approximately 40,000 Iranian troops who have served in Syria, tens of thousands of fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, and around 20,000 members of pro-Iranian Afghan, Iraqi or Pakistani militias such as the Liwa Fatemiyoun serving in Syria.

To this must be added not only thousands of Russian troops and associated warplanes and warships, but also Chinese "Night Tiger" special forces who have deployed to Syria to fight Uighur Islamist "rebels" allied to NATO, amid growing military collaboration between China and Syria.

Yesterday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov again restated Russia's opposition to the deployment of more foreign troops to Syria. He said, "As for the presence of American soldiers in Syria, our position is well known—only the Russian units are present in Syria legitimately at the invitation of the Syrian leadership. Of course, the final goal is a full withdrawal of any foreign armed forces, foreign military from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic."

The decision of Washington and Berlin to call for military operations to confront such forces is yet another warning of the escalating danger of world war.



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