

Trump Roils NATO While Backing Pact --- U.S. president cites 'tremendous progress' on defense spending; others dispute claim

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FULL TEXT

BRUSSELS – President Donald Trump jolted U.S. allies with fresh demands to boost military spending swiftly, prompting some NATO members on Thursday to worry his critical approach was undermining the alliance.

Mr. Trump said "tremendous progress" was made on boosting defense outlays during a North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit and declared the group "much stronger than it was two days ago."

Several NATO leaders disputed Mr. Trump's assertion of new funding pledges but credit him with encouraging commitments for tens of billions of dollars more in military spending since he came to office last year.

"The United States commitment to NATO is very strong, remains very strong," Mr. Trump said. "I believe in NATO."

The president's praise followed a session in which he pressed other allied leaders to raise their military contributions – ticking down a country-by-country list of defense budgets while praising some and criticizing others, according to Foreign Minister Didier Reynders of Belgium.

Mr. Trump appeared to warn he might loosen U.S. ties to NATO if spending didn't rise quickly enough, diplomats said. "I'll do my own thing" in that case, he warned the other leaders.

Boosting military budgets is aimed at making NATO a more capable and battle-ready force to help prevent aggressive acts by Russia and other rivals. U.S. leaders have tried in vain for years to persuade allies to raise military spending.

But some officials warned that the public bluntness of Mr. Trump's critiques and hints that the U.S. could walk away if its demands aren't met have damaged trust within the 29-nation alliance and risk undermining its effectiveness as a deterrent force by raising doubts about Washington's commitment to its partners.

Many Europeans, wary of threats from Moscow, also are concerned about Mr. Trump's meeting with President Vladimir Putin of Russia on Monday in Finland. Mr. Trump has repeatedly spoken favorably of Mr. Putin and said on Thursday he is "a competitor," not an enemy. "Hopefully, some day, maybe he'll be a friend. It could happen," Mr. Trump said.

In the summit declaration, members committed to new measures to further strengthen the alliance and deter Russia – such as speeding the ability to move troops and equipment to Russia's neighbors – an initiative

advocated by the U.S. Washington has already raised its own military spending commitment to Europe.

"All allies have heard Trump's message loud and clear," said NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in closing remarks. "There's a new sense of urgency thanks to President Trump's strong leadership on spending."

Despite the pledges, there were no immediate tangible results.

Mr. Trump demanded on Wednesday that allies "immediately" spend 2% of their GDP on defense rather than meet that threshold by 2024 as planned. He also sought a 4% commitment from allies. NATO leaders thought the issue was resolved after Wednesday's communique confirmed earlier spending targets.

French and Italian leaders said on Thursday they would stick to existing spending plans.

"It's not realistic to believe that we will reach 2% next year," said Charles Michel, prime minister of Belgium.

Leaders pledged to redouble efforts to win backing for increased spending when they return to their capitals.

Mr. Trump's tone in tweets and meetings – described by Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen as "bombastic" – has worn on many allied officials, who answer to constituencies that in many cases hold Mr. Trump in low regard.

"Sometimes the sideline comments are taking on greater importance than the final declarations, even for the leaders," President Emmanuel Macron of France said.

Leaders avoided directly criticizing Mr. Trump. One recalled that last month he withdrew support for a Group of Seven communique in a tweet sent from Air Force One after he departed.

"He has Wi-Fi on the plane, so we will have to see in the end," said Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel on Thursday morning.

Given the acrimonious ending to the G-7, many participants feared on Wednesday more rancor after Mr. Trump at a breakfast meeting with Mr. Stoltenberg attacked European governments over spending and called Germany a "captive" of Russia because of natural-gas purchases.

The summit's first day ended on a calm note. At a gala dinner in a park and art museum in the center of Belgium's capital, Mr. Trump was jovial and nonconfrontational, according to people who attended.

European leaders avoided hot-button issues, which bothered at least one attendee. European Council President Donald Tusk, a former Polish prime minister who has repeatedly criticized Mr. Trump's attitude to Europe, laced his dinner address with sarcasm.

"It seems that there's no single conflict or even difference among us," he told the gathering. "Enjoy this moment. And let it last also tomorrow and the day after tomorrow."

It didn't last. Early Thursday morning, Mr. Trump launched a string of tweets once again attacking European spending.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany said later that she "made clear, for Germany, that we know we need to do more and that the change has been happening for some time."

Some leaders pushed back against Mr. Trump's criticisms, citing various ways they contribute to NATO. Denmark's Mr. Rasmussen rejected measuring efforts only by spending, according to a person familiar with the discussions. Danish casualties in Afghanistan are proportional to U.S. casualties there, Mr. Rasmussen told Mr. Trump, this person said.

"We can't look the families of those people in the eye if we look at NATO only in terms of money," Mr. Rasmussen said, according to the person.

Mr. Trump responded, "good point," the person said.

Credit: By Valentina Pop, Laurence Norman and Robert Wall

DETAILS

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