



ISSUE BRIEF

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NATO Summit 2018

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The NATO Summit held in July 2018 in Brussels provided an opportunity to its member states to evaluate their intergovernmental military alliance. The Summit was aimed at revitalizing counter strategies to repel any possible Russian aggression through deterrence and defense. While taking the stock of their cooperation and progress on the last two Summits held in 2016 and 2017, it decided to step up the fight against terrorism. The NATO members also agreed on ensuring fairer burden-sharing among all allies.

The joint declaration signed between the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, European Council President Donald Tusk and President European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker stated that NATO and the European Union would further strengthen their cooperation in a range of areas, including military mobility, counter-terrorism, and resilience to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-related risks. They would work harder to promote women empowerment, peace and security agenda.¹

The two organizations have already stepped up their cooperation in recent years, including on maritime security, countering hybrid threats and fighting terrorism. NATO and the EU now exchange real-time warnings on cyber-attacks, participate in each other's exercises, and work together in responding to the refugee and migrant crisis. Jens Stoltenberg also reiterated that “Our decisions at

¹ “NATO and EU leaders sign joint declaration”, *Official Text North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, July 10, 2018. www.nato.int

the Brussels Summit show that, as the world changes, Europe and North America stand together and act together in NATO.”²

This was a welcome conclusion to a speculated fraught NATO summit which was initially threatened by President Donald Trump’s pre-summit controversial remarks at a breakfast meeting with Stoltenberg that Germany is “totally controlled” by and “captive to Russia”³. He was referring to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that would bring gas from Russia to Germany’s northeastern Baltic coast, bypassing Eastern European nations like Poland and Ukraine. It would double the amount of gas Russia can send directly to Germany. The vast undersea pipeline is opposed by the US and some other EU members, who warn that it could give Moscow greater leverage over Western Europe.⁴

In her confident response to the Trump’s remarks, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the reporters that, “I have experienced myself how a part of Germany was controlled by the Soviet Union. I am very happy that today we are united in freedom, the Federal Republic of Germany. Because of that we can say that we can make our independent policies and make independent decisions. That is very good, especially for people in eastern Germany.”⁵

Germany projects power in Europe. Despite Merkel’s fragile political government, its central geographical location ensures its pivotal status in the US security concerns in the Eastern Europe and vis a vis Russia. US has to depend on Germany, whose transportation structure for both material and forces is significant for the supply of NATO’s logistics. Since the Cold War, the US has heavily relied on the bases it has built in Germany over the past several decades to meet its requirements of addressing counter-terrorism operations in the Middle-East, Africa and beyond. Even today, more than 30,000 personnel are stationed there and the US European and African military commands are also located in Germany.⁶

Speaking on the eve of the NATO Summit, the European Council President, Donald Tusk, reminded President Trump that the relationship between NATO and Europe is an investment in the common

² “Trump’s strained visit with NATO, meeting with Putin”, *The Economic Times*, July 10, 2018. economictimes.indiatimes.com

³ Ben Riley-Smith, James Crisp and Christopher Hope, “Donal Trump says Germany ‘is totally controlled by Russia’ in clash with Angela Merkel at NATO Summit”, *The Telegraph*, July 7, 2018. www.telegraph.co.uk

⁴ “Trump’s strained visit with NATO, meeting with Putin”, Op.cit.

⁵ “Trump launches fresh tirade against Nato and Germany during incoherent speech to US steel workers”, *Independent*, July 27, 2018. www.independent.co.uk

⁶ Michael Birnbaum, “If they needed to fend off war with Russia, U.S. military leaders worry they might not get there in time”, *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2018.

defense of America and Europe.⁷ He said that America does not have many allies. “Money is important but solidarity is more important”.⁸

Earlier, on July 2, 2018, the tensions ramped up between the US and NATO member countries mainly due to the letters written by President Trump to eight member states ahead of his visit to Brussels. Although the step was particularly aimed at Berlin as the biggest and richest NATO ally; however, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, Norway and the Netherlands were also cautioned for not meeting their commitments made in 2014 to spend 2 per cent of their national GDP on defense by 2024. Only Great Britain, Greece and Estonia have been able to meet the spending target. NATO has a budget of \$685 billion. US contribute about \$2.8 billion which amounts to 22 per cent of NATO's total costs. NATO is expected to spend an extra \$266 billion on defense between now and 2024.

The ties between the US and many of its longest-standing allies have been wavering ever since Trump took office. His "America first" policy, pulling the US out of the Paris climate agreement, as well as the Iran nuclear deal, striking tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, and threatening additional tariffs on products like automobiles have perturbed the confidence of many European nations.

On the other hand, Europe still retains a reputation of being a representative of liberal global order and multilateral institutions. Its reflexive cooperative approaches to security, climate change and human rights are globally recognized despite the trends identified in the erosion of liberal norms seen in the recently held elections.

One must not forget that European countries have their own security priorities. Power vacuum in Libya is of immense worry for Italy since it has taken the maximum burden of the migrants flow from the Mediterranean. Similarly, France is embroiled in various security missions in the Middle East and wants to bolster its overall power projection capabilities. Britain is struggling with its tight fiscal constraints, Brexit and defense spending. And Merkel still has to convince her country's divided public opinion on military spending.

When NATO was first created in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide collective security against the then Soviet Union, it was the only competing power. Today, rising China is an emerging challenge. Whether it is Philippines or Turkey, both China

⁷ Julie Harshfield Davis, “As Trump criticizes NATO, EU leaders warned: You wouldn’t have a better ally”, *The New York Times*, July 10, 2018. www.nytimes.com

⁸ Ibid.

and Russia is trying to draw traditional allies away from the US. It would be hard for the US to diminish the value of NATO's alliance system.

Europe was the first and the largest military support to have responded to 9/11 attack as an immediate reaction. NATO allies and operational partners have once again assured their continuing support to the Afghan government's determination to eliminate the threat of terrorism in all its forms, including that posed by ISIS/Daesh affiliates and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The press statement given after the NATO session on July 11, 2018, reaffirmed that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan is in the interest of the West and that of the entire region. The Summit also recognized the role of the regional actors to achieve peace and stabilization in Afghanistan by fully supporting a negotiated political solution, and by not lending any form of support to the insurgency. At the conclusion of the Summit, Pakistan was urged to continue to act on its stated support for a political solution to the conflict, to close terrorist sanctuaries and to work to prevent terrorist financial flows and cross-border attacks. It should continue working with its neighbors to counter the causes of any regional instability. The Summit welcomed finalization of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, and urged that an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process would help strengthen peace efforts.⁹

While some of the NATO members may have stood up as an effective and collective response to rising insecurities caused by the leadership of Trump, technological advances and emerging alliances, the basic strategic direction of the organization cannot be said to have vacillated. The EU's independent defense policy, if and when devised, is also likely be characterized more as a complementary rather than a competing feature of NATO in a struggle to preserve a secure and safe Europe.

⁹ "Countering Terrorism", *NATO Home Page*, July 17, 2018, www.nato.int