

Transatlantic rift: on Trump and NATO

The summit of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation leaders in Brussels [was expected to be tense](#), given the widening rift in the Western alliance over the U.S.'s imposition of trade tariffs. But President Donald Trump's call to member-countries to double their annual defence expenditure to 4% of GDP has the potential for greater harm than his repeated denigration of NATO or his disregard for diplomatic niceties. European countries have for some time been smarting under Washington's persistent attack on their failure to honour the current commitment to raise their defence budgets to 2% of annual output by 2024. NATO members were reminded of the unequal burden-sharing within the organisation via letters despatched from the White House ahead of the summit. Mr. Trump can launch his latest offensive largely due to the latitude he enjoys on account of the U.S. spending well in excess of 3% of GDP on defence in 2017-18. He took aim especially at Germany, highlighting in particular the incongruity between its military spending and huge trade surplus with the U.S. A relatively recent dimension to the diatribe is the attack on Germany's large imports of gas from Russia, a divisive issue within Europe, particularly after the threats posed by Moscow's regional ambitions. Besides putting Chancellor Angela Merkel in a spot, it served to deflect attention from criticism across the Atlantic of Mr. Trump's proximity to Russian President Vladimir Putin and their bilateral meeting in Helsinki.

NATO defence spending hike: Trump claims victory, Macron disagrees

Notwithstanding Mr. Trump's claims, Europe's expenditure on defence has been on the rise since 2014, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). One explanation for this shift is the security situation following Russia's annexation of Crimea. IISS data also show that Washington's commitment to Europe's security is just over 5% of the total U.S. defence budget. Within that, its contribution to NATO's common funding is an estimated 22.1%, besides investments in other initiatives. Some of Mr. Trump's predecessors in the White House had sought to address this imbalance, but without ever questioning the commitment of Washington's allies to the bloc's collective defence, or using it as a bargaining chip. Conversely, exploiting Europe's greater dependence on the U.S. security umbrella serves to bolster Mr. Trump's domestic nationalist constituency ahead of the November mid-term Congressional elections. While not all Republicans may approve of the President's offensive against American allies, many prefer to emphasise substance over style. The communiqué issued after the summit reiterates the group's resolve to meet the 2024 deadline on defence spending. But Mr. Trump seems impatient on achieving the target sooner, without spelling out his reasons. The world will learn more about Mr. Trump's America First agenda in the coming months.

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