

Pentagon chief warns of “arc of instability” at Munich security conference

By Bill Van Auken
18 February 2017

James “Mad Dog” Mattis, the retired Marine general and US defense secretary, delivered a speech at the annual Munich security conference that appeared designed to soothe the sharp tensions between Europe and America that have emerged in the wake of President Donald Trump’s inauguration.

Mattis sounded a warning to the conference aimed at justifying a further escalation of US and NATO militarism. “We all see our community of nations under threat on multiple fronts as the arc of instability builds on NATO’s periphery and beyond,” he told the meeting, which brought together some 70 defense ministers as well as a number of heads of state. Vice President Mike Pence is to address the conference on Saturday.

The “arc of instability” is a phrase that encompasses multiple targets for US aggression, including the Middle East, North Africa and both Iran and Russia.

Mattis went on to declare that “American security is permanently tied to the security of Europe,” adding, “I have great respect for Germany’s leadership in Europe.”

At the same time, he echoed remarks made earlier at a NATO meeting in Brussels, where he warned that Washington could “moderate” its support for the alliance if other member states did not increase their military spending. “It is a fair demand that all who benefit from the best alliance in the world carry their proportionate share of the necessary costs to defend our freedoms,” he said.

The Pentagon chief’s remarks appeared largely in continuity with US foreign policy pursued by previous administrations and were at odds with Trump’s own rhetorical attacks on NATO as “obsolete” and his labeling of the European Union as a “consortium” exploited by Germany for its own interests.

Mattis’s speech came in the midst of the ferocious internecine battle within the US ruling establishment over US policy toward Russia, which came to head with the forced resignation of Trump’s national security advisor Michael Flynn over his pre-inauguration conversations with the Russian ambassador to the US.

Both Mattis and the US secretary of state, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who was attending a nearby meeting of the G-20 foreign ministers in Bonn, have signaled that there is no imminent prospect of a rapprochement that would significantly ease tensions between Washington and Moscow.

Even as Mattis was speaking in Munich, the US military was deploying to Bulgaria as part of the US-NATO buildup in Eastern Europe and on Russia’s borders that now involves 4,000 American troops as well as forces from Britain, Germany and other NATO allies. This buildup has continued unabated since Trump entered the White House.

The speech by the Pentagon chief was accompanied by remarks by his German counterpart, Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, which included fairly pointed criticism of the rhetoric on Europe coming from the Trump White House.

“Our American friends know well that your tone on Europe and NATO has a direct impact on the cohesion of our continent,” von der Leyen told the Munich Security Conference. Warning against any move by Washington toward rapprochement with Russia, she added, “There cannot be a policy of equidistance to allies and to those who openly question our values, our borders and international law.”

In what amounted to a thinly veiled attack on Trump’s abortive attempt to impose a travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries, the German

defense minister told the conference: “We should be careful that this fight does not become a front against Islam and Muslims. Otherwise we run the risk of digging ourselves into a deeper grave in which violence and terror only grow further.”

Prior to the Munich conference, Mattis stated that there could be no military cooperation between the US and Russia until Moscow “proves itself,” reiterating the US position underlying sanctions over Ukraine and Crimea.

Tillerson sounded a similar note Friday, explicitly rejecting any shift from the general strategy pursued by Washington in relation to Syria since the launching of the CIA-orchestrated war for regime change nearly six years ago. Meeting with his counterparts from other major backers of the Islamist “rebels,” including France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Britain, the US secretary of state stressed that there would be no military cooperation with Russia in Syria until Moscow distanced itself from the government of Bashar al-Assad and accepted the legitimacy of the Al Qaeda-linked rebels that the US and its allies have armed and supported.

Tillerson also reiterated support for the UN-led talks on Syria that are supposed to resume next Thursday in Geneva. The Russian government of President Vladimir Putin had invited Washington to participate in talks brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, but the Trump administration sent only the local ambassador as an observer.

While Tillerson’s and Mattis’s interventions in Brussels, Bonn and Munich were clearly aimed at calming tensions that have grown between the US and Europe, the bitter character of the battle raging within Washington ruling circles was expressed in Munich by an extraordinary speech delivered by Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican and head of the Senate armed services committee. This internecine conflict has nothing to do with the democratic or social rights of the vast majority of the population, but is rather driven by rival US war strategies.

McCain described the Trump administration, which his party ostensibly supports, as in “disarray,” and suggested that it was part of “an increasing turn away from universal values and toward old ties of blood and race and sectarianism.”

Referring to the forced resignation of Trump’s national security advisor, McCain told his audience in Munich: “I think that the Flynn issue obviously is something that shows that in many respects this administration is in disarray and they’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Drawing a distinction between Trump’s “America First” rhetoric and the policies advanced by his top advisors, McCain continued: “I know there is profound concern across Europe and the world that America is laying down the mantle of global leadership. I can only speak for myself, but I do not believe that that is the message you will hear from all of the American leaders who cared enough to travel here to Munich this weekend. That’s not the message you heard today from Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. That is not the message you will hear from Vice President Mike Pence. That’s not the message you will hear from Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly.”

McCain, one of Washington’s most vociferous advocates of aggression against Russia, was at the center of a controversy last month in which he passed documents to US intelligence agencies alleging secret ties between Moscow and Trump and his campaign team.

These actions, as well as the open attack on a sitting president by his own party at an international conference in Munich, are virtually unprecedented. They reflect the intense hostility within the US military and intelligence apparatus against any move by the Trump administration to pull back from the protracted escalation of provocations and aggression against Russia. To the extent that Trump has advanced an alternative policy, it has not been one of retreat from global militarism, but rather a tactical shift toward first preparing for war first against Iran and escalating the US confrontation with China.

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