

NATO expands military spending and sends thousands of troops to Afghanistan

By Johannes Stern
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The meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels on Thursday took place in the midst of a massive military build-up.

“This will be the third consecutive year of accelerating defence investment across European Allies and Canada,” declared NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg at a press conference. In total, spending has risen by close to \$46 billion since 2015.

The figures were proof, according to Stoltenberg, that the NATO members were making good progress towards the commitment they made in 2014 of increasing defence spending to 2 percent of GDP in real terms within a decade. “In 2017, twenty-five Allies will increase defence spending in real terms. This year, we expect Romania to spend 2% of GDP on defence, joining the five countries already meeting this benchmark, and next year, Latvia and Lithuania will join them, spending 2% or more on defence,” said Stoltenberg.

German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democrats, CDU) committed Germany to the 2 percent target the previous day in a meeting in Gartisch-Partenkirchen with her US counterpart James “Mad Dog” Mattis. Germany was willing to “strengthen” its forces “to demonstrate its reliability,” stated the Defence Minister.

This is not merely empty rhetoric. The German government presented a financial plan the same day that proposes a €1.6 billion increase in the military budget in 2018 to approximately €38.5 billion. Defence spending will increase to €42.4 billion by 2021. The full increase in the new financial plan amounts to around €9 billion. This would “continue to reverse the trend in personnel and procurement in the army.”

The major hikes in military spending are enabling the NATO states to expand their aggressive war policies. Stoltenberg announced that the alliance would increase its troop presence in Afghanistan, meeting the demands of its

military planners. Fifteen states had already announced increased contributions and more would follow, he added. The goal, he said, is to enable the Afghan security forces “to end the stalemate and make progress on the battlefield.” There is “a close connection between developments on the battlefield and the possibility of reaching a political solution.”

In addition, Stoltenberg praised the NATO build-up in Eastern Europe, which increases the danger of a military clash with nuclear-armed Russia. The NATO soldiers in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland were “fully operational” and the multinational headquarters in Poland and Romania had been “activated.” This sent “a clear message to any possible aggressor.”

Russia’s ambassador to NATO, Alexander Grushko, condemned the NATO build-up and warned of a new arms race. He stated in an interview with *Die Welt*, “The Europeans’ defence spending alone is four times higher than Russia’s budget.” There is “a very dangerous trend towards the militarisation of international relations.” This could “lead to a new arms race.”

Grushko sharply criticised the stationing of NATO troops in Eastern Europe and announced countermeasures. “With these military steps and build-ups on its Eastern flank, NATO is creating a new security environment which we cannot ignore and will respond to with our own military forces.”

Grushko’s remarks underscore that the government of President Vladimir Putin has no progressive answer to the NATO offensive. It defends the interests of a capitalist oligarchy that enriched itself through the theft of state property following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The Russian government responds to imperialist aggression with its own military countermeasures, thereby increasing the war danger.

The regime in Moscow opposes any step to unite the working class in Europe and around the world against the

imperialist warmongers. Instead, it begs for a deal with the imperialist powers. “We have clearly said that we are willing to cooperate with anyone wanting to contribute to our joint struggle against terrorism,” Grushko noted. There was ultimately a “joint goal” of eliminating ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The real goal of the imperialist powers is not to defeat ISIS, but to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad and establish a puppet regime in Damascus. Their military intervention in Syria and Iraq is moreover part of a much broader struggle for the redivision of the energy-rich Middle East and the entire world, which is also intensifying the conflicts between the imperialist powers.

Stoltenberg indicated that the European powers were not rearming in response to US demands, but were increasingly pursuing their own economic and geostrategic interests. “I welcome the strong focus from President Trump on defence spending and burden sharing,” said Stoltenberg. But it could not simply be about “doing the US a favour.” Instead, these efforts are bound up with the interests of the alliance partners, Stoltenberg continued.

In the lead-up to the G-20 summit, Germany in particular is working to pursue these “interests” increasingly in opposition to the United States. Yesterday’s government statement by German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) in parliament was a barely concealed attack on the US and was presented by the media as a “challenge to Donald Trump.”

“Whoever believes the world’s problems can be resolved with isolationism and protectionism is committing a grave error,” stated Merkel. “Since the decision by the United States to leave the Paris Agreement on climate change, we are more determined than ever to work for its success.” The Paris Agreement was “irreversible” and “non-negotiable,” and one had to “expect tough talks in Hamburg. The distance is obvious, and it would be disingenuous to conceal this.”

Merkel called into question the alliance with the US, which formed the basis for Germany’s post-war foreign policy, in a speech delivered in a Munich beer tent following the G-7 summit. “The times in which we could fully depend on others are to some extent over,” she said, and drew from this the conclusion, “We Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands” and “fight for our future ourselves.”

In the government statement, she welcomed the European military build-up agreed to at last week’s EU summit and insisted “that Europe [would] assume more

responsibility in the fight against terrorism and in common security and defence policy, and cooperate more closely.” Germany in particular had “a natural interest in Europe staying together in the future.”

Berlin’s goal is the development of the EU into a great power under German leadership that is capable of advancing its interests against the United States. “We have to make Europe stronger again,” Social Democrat parliamentary group leader Thomas Oppermann told the deputies in his speech. A “result of the unpredictability of Donald Trump” was that “Europe has to take more care of its security.”

“A well-placed European defence union naturally requires a well-equipped German army,” stated Oppermann, before condemning the CDU-led Defence Ministry from the right. “The defence ministers of the past twelve years have allowed the army to be used as a means to consolidate the budget. They rushed through the army reform and the suspension of military service without any plan. Our armed forces continue to combat a lack of personnel and poor equipment.” His party would “ensure that this changes in the next parliamentary session.”

Together with the Left Party and Greens, the SPD is playing a critical role in transforming the widespread opposition to Trump into support for German imperialism with propaganda about “peace” and “climate protection.” The US president is dividing “the West” on “an existential issue,” stated Oppermann to applause from the Left Party and Greens. Therefore, it is “necessary to clearly position ourselves against Donald Trump ... We have the clear expectation, Mrs. Merkel, that you will bring about a 19-1 alliance on climate protection in Hamburg.”

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