

Transatlantic Ties Rest on Europe's Shoulders

by Kurt Volker¹

Two moments during the speech of American Vice President Mike Pence at this year's Munich Security Conference sum up the current state of Transatlantic relations.

The first was when the Vice President gave a clear, forceful and authoritative statement of the U.S. commitment to NATO and to Europe. He prefaced these remarks by saying he was sent by President Trump, and was making this commitment on his behalf. After weeks of European concern about statements President Trump made during the election campaign, Vice President Pence could not have been more clear. The United States remains committed to Europe. The reaction of the audience was strong: sustained loud applause, both at this point in the speech, and when he reiterated the point in his conclusion.

The second moment was when the Vice President called on Europeans to join the United States in raising defense spending and committing to a strong NATO and transatlantic partnership. He stressed that for too long, many European Allies have promised to carry their fair share of the defense burden, and then failed to do so. He cited former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates. He cited the 2014 NATO Wales Summit commitment of all NATO states to get on track to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, to which there has been relatively little follow-through. He stressed that the time for action is now. To this point, the Vice President received only tepid applause, and mainly from Americans in the room.

Europeans want the United States to be strongly committed to NATO, to Europe, and to the European Union. Yet when the United States says it wants Europe to be equally committed, Europe demurs.

A similar moment occurred during the visit of a very senior European official to Washington in early February, just after the visit to Florida of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The visitor was told how well the Japanese leader had cemented U.S.-Japanese ties by playing golf with the President – a gesture of friendship that yielded a vital statement of support when North Korea fired a missile toward Japan. But when asked “which European leader would become the President’s ‘golf-buddy?’ ” the visitor instinctively shuddered and asserted that no European leader would *want* to be the President’s ‘golf-buddy.’

And that sums it up: As much as Europeans complain about the language and style of President Trump, it is European leaders’ own lack of will to share the defense

¹ Kurt Volker is a former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and currently serves as Executive Director of the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University.

burden, and to engage with the new U.S. administration as a strategic partner, that now puts the transatlantic relationship at risk, and with it the future of Europe.

Long before President Trump was elected, Americans would ask themselves why they should care more about Europe's defense than Europeans themselves. President Obama pushed hard for Europeans to do more, and decided to "lead from behind," "pivot to Asia" and let Europe handle "European problems" (such as Ukraine) in an unsuccessful effort to force Europe's hand. President Trump is following through on the frustration of several previous U.S. Administrations over the United States carrying more than its share of the defense burden.

One can now add to this the growing skepticism toward the European Union within many European nations themselves. Some Americans – and particularly an Administration that won its election based on challenging Washington elites – will see parallels, real or imagined, and wonder why the United States should articulate stronger support for the EU, and its elite establishment in Brussels, than Europeans themselves.

Europe faces an extraordinary number of challenges today: Russian actions in Ukraine, refugee flows, crises in the Middle East and North Africa, the Euro-zone, slow to no economic growth, public frustration with traditional political parties, the rise of far-right and far-left populist movements, the Brexit, and more.

European leaders are right to think that to manage these challenges, it is critical to have a strong transatlantic link, a strong NATO, a strong European Union. And they are also right that it is in the interest of the United States to have such a strong relationship and such strong institutions.

But Europeans need to recognize that the responsibility for making this a reality rests squarely on their shoulders. The United States has made its commitment clear. But European failure to raise defense spending, and constant, moralizing criticism of the United States and the new Administration, will not strengthen NATO and the transatlantic partnership – quite the opposite.

The United States has done its part with the visit of Vice President Pence. Following his visit, and his strong words of support for Europe and NATO, there are now two months until President Trump's first visit to Europe – a visit that will include a NATO Summit in Brussels and a G-7 Summit in Sicily. This means that there are two months in which European leaders can get defense spending on track, and build a positive relationship and agenda for working with the United States.

The alternative will be weakened institutions and a weakened transatlantic partnership. And this will not serve any of our common interests.