

Hours Into the Job, Pompeo Steps Up for NATO

Barely 12 hours after being sworn in U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went straight to NATO headquarters on Friday in what European allies saw as strong support for an institution that U.S. President Donald Trump once called obsolete.

In a closed-door meeting, Pompeo and fellow foreign ministers of the military pact forged a consensus on the need for a response to “Russian aggression,” a U.S. official said, adding that Pompeo pressed allies to raise military budgets.

Earlier Pompeo was quick to praise NATO as “invaluable” just minutes after getting off his plane, in his first meeting of the day, with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, a sharp contrast to Trump’s earlier rebuke of the alliance.

“The work that is being done here today is invaluable and our objectives are important and this mission means a lot to the United States of America,” Pompeo told Stoltenberg.

Despite European confusion about Trump’s foreign policy and his “America First” rhetoric, allies feted Pompeo. Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok said it was “impressive to come here one night after being inaugurated. It’s an impressive start.”

Stoltenberg said Pompeo’s visit to Brussels was “a great expression of the importance of the alliance.”

Pompeo, a former Army officer who was a Republican Congressman, is regarded as a loyal supporter of Trump with hawkish views. But on Russia those views are largely shared by European allies because of Moscow’s 2014 seizure of Crimea.

Pompeo’s presence at NATO was seen as crucial as the alliance

prepares for a July 11-12 summit in Brussels where NATO leaders are set to agree a new deterrent to Moscow, including a command to defend the Atlantic in the case of conflict.

Even before his confirmation on Thursday, the former CIA director was already involved in U.S. diplomacy, although this is first meeting at NATO, an organization founded on defense against the threat from the former Soviet Union.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said NATO needed to respond to what the West says is the Kremlin's mix of not just the conventional military threat but covert and cyber warfare.

"One of the key things we're doing is looking again at ... how we strengthen our collective response to the kind of hybrid attacks that so many NATO allies are experiencing from Russia," he told reporters.

The NATO foreign ministers meeting follows the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian agent in Britain, and Western air strikes against Russia-allied Syria, which the United States accused of a chemical attack in Douma on April 7.

The allies discussed Russia with Pompeo, focusing on the Skripal affair and Syria, and a push for NATO to find new ways to counter Russian tactics.

"There was consensus on Russian aggression, the scale of Russian aggression and this being a problem that requires a response," said a U.S. official present at the closed-door session, adding that decisions on the issue will be left to NATO leaders.

Middle East Dipomacy

Pompeo pressed allies to increase their military budgets to meet a target of two percent of economic output spent on defense every year by 2024, as well as ensuring 20 percent of the outlay is on equipment, a U.S. official said.

The issue is sensitive to Europeans because the region is recovering from a long economic crisis and defense spending is less of a priority. But the United States insists that allies, especially Germany, pay their fair share of defending Europe.

As he left Washington on Thursday, the State Department said Pompeo would also visit Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel during the weekend. He will have to quickly address a wide array of pressing international issues, including long conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, as well as Russian assertiveness.

Washington is also working with European allies France, Germany and Britain on toughening a 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, an issue Pompeo is expected to discuss while in Brussels.

Pompeo opposed the Iran nuclear accord while in Congress.

He once suggested the answer to Tehran's nuclear program—which Iran has always said was for peaceful means only—was 2,000 bombing sorties.

Pompeo said during his confirmation he was open to fixing, rather than blowing apart, the pact, which the West believes is essential to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear bomb.

He will discuss the nuclear agreement and Iran's regional influence in Yemen and Syria when he visits the Middle East.

On his first stop in Saudi Arabia on Saturday, Pompeo will meet Saudi King Salman and Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir. In Jerusalem, he will meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and in Jordan hold talks with King Abdullah. {eoa}

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