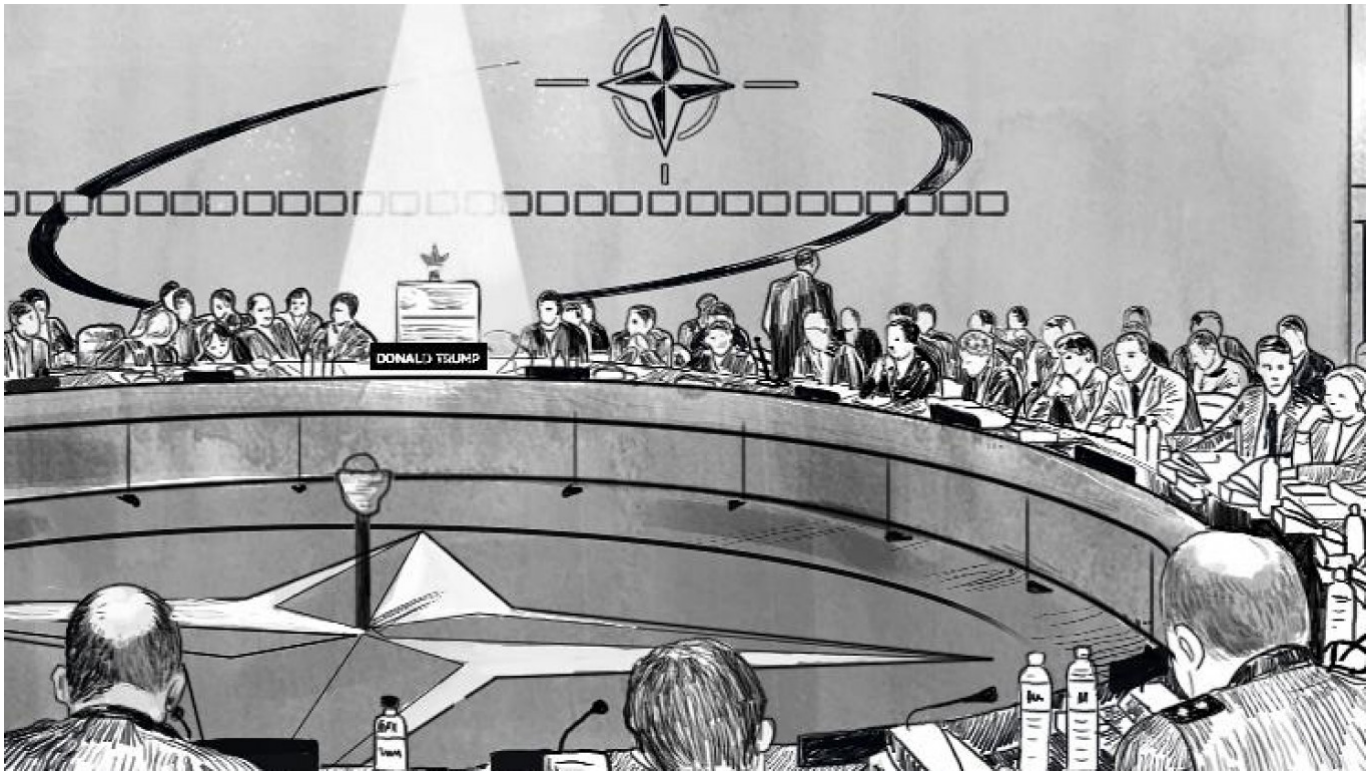
The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

NATO Pivots to Europe

In the face of an uncertain Trump presidency, NATO looks elsewhere for support

By Matthew Bodner

December 07, 2016



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BRUSSELS — As U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Brussels on Wednesday for his final NATO ministerial meeting, the buzzword driving the discourse at the headquarters of the Western military alliance was the "transatlantic bond." Beneath the cold diplomatic understandings upon which the alliance is built, NATO relies heavily on such rhetoric to justify its existence.

But with the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States almost a month ago, the future of the so-called transatlantic bond has been thrown into question. Trump's campaign was littered with statements indicating, at best, a casual disregard for Washington's commitments to European security.

Trump's nomination of retired Marine General James Mattis for his secretary of defense, along with several rumored candidates for secretary of state suggest his administration may be less disruptive than initially anticipated.

Some candidates for the top diplomat job are establishment heavyweights like Mitt Romney, and respected foreign policy hands like Jon Huntsman. As for Mattis, he is a decorated general who served as NATO's supreme allied commander of transformation. Mattis has spoken of the need to bolster NATO's warfighting capabilities and spoken of the threat posed to European order by a revanchist Russia.

But Trump will still be the commander-in-chief, and the uncertainty emanating from Washington has nonetheless left European allies looking inward for security assurances.

New Agreement

The meeting in Brussels this week was almost entirely focused on a landmark agreement between NATO and the European Union. The two have had a historically awkward relationship. Though both sides stressed the agreement has been in the works for some time, a senior NATO official admitted consensus was not certain "even three days ago."

The agreement, according to materials given to reporters at the ministerial meeting, is expansive, covering 40 points and seven "mutual security concerns." The document prioritizes countering the so-called hybrid threat — a placeholder term for Moscow's tactics used in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The agreement was vindication of the long-held fears of NATO's eastern members, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs said in an interview with The Moscow Times on Dec. 6.

"Two years ago, when we were talking about propaganda and so on, we were told we were being paranoid, that this was a specific eastern and groundless concern," he says. "But now it's the German government, the Dutch government, and they are more concerned about some of these issues than we were when warning about them a year or two ago!"

While nations like Latvia may feel vindication, the new agreements represent a rational move for NATO's European members, many of whom are also EU members, as they try to create some sense of continuity before Trump's inauguration next year. A summit with Trump, vaguely planned for sometime before the summer of 2017, has yet to be scheduled.

Kerry, for his part, did his best to assure his European counterparts that the U.S. would remain strongly committed to its NATO partners. Striking a hopeful and optimistic tone, reminiscent of his cheerleading speech at the Munich security conference in February, Kerry encouraged the alliance to soldier on.

"The change of the administration will not change the unwavering commitment of the U.S. to our NATO obligations," Kerry said. "The U.S. commitment to NATO and Article Five transcends politics," he said, addressing concerns that Trump might not answer the call to defend allies from attacks, as stipulated by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the cornerstone of NATO.

NATO Contributions

The United States, historically the bedrock of the NATO alliance, accounts for over 70 percent of defense spending within the 28-member bloc. While Trump may have rattled NATO members with talk of defending only those members who honor their commitment to spend at least two percent of their GDP on defense, he was not the first American leader to draw attention to the imbalance.

The question of Trump's policies toward NATO and European security are, perhaps, most prescient for the nations of Eastern Europe. And already, they seem to be learning to speak Trump's language. In interviews with The Moscow Times, both the Latvian and Lithuanian foreign ministers downplayed the potential for change.

Publicly, both ministers accepted the president elect's critique of NATO spending, and stressed they were doing all they could to meet their spending obligations. Latvia and Lithuania, unlike Poland and Estonia, currently do not meet the 2 percent benchmark.

Latvia's Rinkēvičs told The Moscow Times that Trump's warning was "was absolutely the right criticism." Moreover, he insisted Latvia had nothing to lose from renewed dialogue between the United States and Russia. "There is a need to look for ways to negotiate on key issues with Russia," he said.

At the same time, the Latvian foreign minister says no deal with Russia should compromise geopolitical stability. While nations close to Russia may be open to a Trump-led detente with their imposing eastern neighbor, accepting some of Moscow's more egregious behavior — such as the illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 — would be a step too far.

It is a matter of international law, Rinkēvičs says. "If the U.S. and Russia engage in dialogue, there are certain principles that should be honored and upheld."

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