

Maintaining the Nato Alliance

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News

Though Defence Secretary Mark Esper stresses US commitment to Europe is “ironclad”, he wants allies to start thinking about future security threats and standing up more against China and Iran, warning that there can be no free-riders, writes Rajnish Singh.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (R) shakes hands with US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper during the Meeting of the NATO Defence Ministers at the NATO headquarters | Photo credit: NATO/dpa/PA Images

Speaking to leading European defence and security experts, US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper identified Iran as the key challenge to peace in the Middle East. Calling on allies to do more to help he said, “We urge allies in Europe to follow our lead and contribute support to help deter Iranian aggression, promote stability in the region, and defend the international rules-based order.”

Speaking in September, at an event organised by the German Marshall Fund in Brussels. He highlighted the Taliban’s continuing attacks on civilians in Afghanistan, Iran’s aggressive behaviour

including the recent attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, and Turkey's 'unwarranted' incursion into northern Syria as all contributing factors to instability in the Middle East.

Also, despite the recent killing of the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he stressed the US will continue to fight against the terrorist organisation. "It is clear there is still a long way to go to achieving peace and stability in that part of the world. In fact, the numerous security challenges of today have the potential to consume our time, to sap our resources, and to dominate our focus."

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Esper told the audience that 2019 will be the US and Nato's 19th consecutive year of fighting in Afghanistan, "a reminder of just how difficult it is to end a war."

While pointing out current security challenges, Esper also stressed the need for European partners to start thinking of potential threats. "To help defend our allies and partners, and safeguard our interests, we must do so with an eye on the future."

Further adding, "New threats are on the horizon, which we ignore at our own peril. Meeting these challenges requires us to contend with today's foes while simultaneously preparing for tomorrow's potential adversaries."

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Esper explained that with the world changing at a faster pace than ever before, new technologies have emerged that could dramatically alter the character of warfare. "Advancements in fields such as artificial intelligence, and hypersonic weapons are increasing the lethality of modern weapon systems and expanding the geometry of the battlefield," he told the audience.

According to the secretary, wars in the future, will no longer just be fought on land, sea, or in the air, but also in space and in cyberspace. To deal with this, he said, "Requires continued reliance on allies and partners, and foresight to expand our war fighting capabilities across all five of these domains."

Esper stated that the two biggest present and future threats to the US and allies were first China and second Russia. He believed that "it was becoming clear, that both Beijing and Moscow want to reshape the world according to their priorities at the expense of others."

Using economics, political subversion, and military force, to erode the sovereignty of weaker states. Undermining the current international rules-based order, that generations before worked so hard to achieve.

He identified China's 'Belt and Road Initiative', as leaving several countries with unsustainable debt,

forcing them to trade their 'sovereignty' for financial relief.

Warning EU Member States, "I would caution my friends in Europe against adopting the mindset that American concerns about Chinese economic and military expansion are overstated or not relevant to their national security."

In particular, he highlighted the involvement of Huawei in providing 5G infrastructure in Europe. "I've counselled our allies - if Huawei becomes the provider of choice, it's going to seriously undermine our ability to share intelligence, and our ability to inter-operate militarily because we simply cannot trust those networks."

He added, "The US is not asking nations to choose between China and the rest of the world, but we are asking them to pursue a future that supports democracy, that enables economic prosperity and that protects human rights."

Similarly, he believed Russia's foreign policy also demonstrated a blatant disregard for state sovereignty. Pointing out Moscow's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine and the use of cyber warfare and hybrid operations, including interference in elections.

Though he reassured the audience that US commitment to Nato and Article 5, which covers collective defence, was 'ironclad', he also stressed, "For the alliance to remain strong, every member must contribute its fair share to ensure our mutual security and uphold the international rules-based order."

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He noted that although all 28 members had committed to a defence spending goal of two percent of GDP by 2024, only eight had achieved this and just over half are currently on track to reach this target. He warned, "There can be no free-riders to our shared security. Regardless of geographic location, size or population, all must do their part to help deter war and defend the alliance."

Though he appreciated in some countries extra spending was hard to sell, saying, "I know domestic populations want to spend money elsewhere, I understand as we have the same issues, but the fact is our security needs to come first. Without our security we can't have economic prosperity and vice versa as well."

He also highlighted concerns that US and other third country defence companies will be prohibited from working on two of the EU's key industrial defence initiatives; the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects.

"This concerns us, we think it is heading in the wrong direction. We believe the marketplace should be kept open and we should continue to collaborate and cooperate with one another. Our view is 'keep the market open' so that we can optimise our security needs."

The Arctic was also identified by Esper as a region where in the future the US and its allies must prepare to defend. "We need to be aware as climate change occurs and see the Northwest passage opening up there with lots of people competing for resources and control of routes coming through there."

Though the US was part of the Arctic Council along with some European allies, so too was Russia and even China as an observer. "Russia is playing a very aggressive game in the Arctic building up their

capabilities to have a presence there. Therefore, we need to be prepared for that, and it's another area where Nato needs to pay attention."

About the author

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