
GERMAN, FRENCH DEFENSE MINISTERS TALK NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY FORCE

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At the press conference in Berlin after their first bilateral meeting, German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and her newly-appointed French colleague Sylvie Goulard started with a few words in each other's language. The message was obvious. France and Germany want to be seen as a unit, working hand-in-hand to make Europe more responsible for its own security.

"We know that our common friendship and common work goes far beyond bilateralism," von der Leyen said. "For both of our countries it's crucial that we create more for Europe and that we work together toward a European defense and security union."

At the core of those efforts is the so-called Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, which in the words of the European Commission, "allows a core group of countries to take systematic steps towards a more coherent security and defense policy without dividing the Union." Essentially, it is a mechanism allowing willing countries to launch joint security projects without requiring all EU member states to agree or participate.

GERMANY'S NATO MISSIONS

Germany's role in NATO

West Germany officially joined the trans-Atlantic alliance in 1955. However, it wasn't until after reunification in 1990 that the German government considered "out of area" missions led by NATO. From peacekeeping to deterrence, Germany's Bundeswehr has since been deployed in several countries across the globe in defense of its allies.

"We have to work together for European immigration, but we also need to be open for other partners," said Goulard, who only became French defense minister two weeks ago. "It's a very ambitious project we're starting, but we don't want to put up any barriers to other European countries that don't share our ambitions."

The two defense ministers said that they had made considerable progress with respect to PESCO and security initiatives to help five countries in sub-Saharan Africa fight terrorism.

Any talk of large European security partners is bound to be read against the backdrop of tensions between Donald Trump and America's NATO partners over spending. So did Thursday's Franco-German meeting come in response to the US president's accusations that Europeans aren't pulling their weight defense-wise?

Von der Leyen is pushing for more military cooperation with France

Not primarily a reaction to Trump

Regardless of its initial motivations, the emphasis on European self-reliance dovetails with the decreased reliability of the US as a partner for Europe, which German Chancellor Angela Merkel highlighted earlier this week.

"This is one of the outcomes since Trump won the US election," leading German security journalist Julia Weigelt told DW. "With Trump's last tour, it became clear that he's not just 'America first' but 'America only and we don't care about the rest.' People may have thought that he was just making campaign promises, but more and more of them are waking up."

But Weigelt adds that the European initiative to assume more responsibility for security predates Trump, going back to the 2014 Munich Security Conference and even further. That's a point made by other security experts as well.

"There's a long-term shift in US interests, and the trans-Atlantic relationship has changed," Christian Mölling of the German Council on Foreign Relations told DW. "The US has been moving out of Europe and more toward Asia. That's true in areas other than security. It's become harder to define common interests between Americans and Europeans. The discussion about an increased role for the EU clearly began before Trump."

Not necessarily about 2 percent

Trump is insisting that all members of NATO spend 2 percent of GDP on defense and has singled out Germany for particular criticism. Last year Germany devoted 1.2 percent of GDP to defense expenditures. The figure in France was 1.8 percent. So will the new security thrust bring defense spending more in line with what Trump wants?

European experts say percentage of GDP spent on defense is a poor measure of how much any country is effectively doing to ensure security for itself and its allies. The key to the PESCO initiative is not just to spend more, but to spend more intelligently.

"If European countries spend their money more wisely, if they get 100 euros more worth of airplane than previously, that strengthens NATO," explains Weigelt. "I think we need to stop thinking in terms of competition. And that's actually what Trump is demanding when he says that we should take responsibility into our own hands."

Increasing efficiency is the main thrust of PESCO. At their joint press conference, the two defense ministers stressed the need to enable Europe as a whole to respond to crises, citing the latest Ebola outbreak in Africa from 2014-16 as an example in which Europe had been unable to act as a whole. Being able to function as a larger unit, say experts, is the key to progress.

"The challenges in the area of defense are no longer a matter of smaller (largely symbolic) associations like the French-German Brigade, but keeping Europe as a whole prepared to intervene militarily," Mölling said.

Differences in philosophy

Neither PESCO nor any other initiative seeks to define the exact form European security

cooperation of the future will take. It's unclear, for instance, whether the aim is to make the EU a security as well as an economic and political institution. That openness is by design.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that it has to happen within the framework of the European Union," Mölling explains. "People are discussing right now whether the EU should play a greater role because we have Brexit or Trump. I don't really care in which institutional framework it happens. The main thing is that something gets done."

But whatever framework, if any, ultimately emerges for Europe's future security concept, differences in outlook with the US and the UK will remain.

"What Trump wants is for Germany to pay more - what Germany wants, since the Munich Security Conference in 2014, is to recognize and fulfill its responsibilities," Weigelt said. "But the difference between the German and the Anglo-American position is that responsibility is not necessarily the same as military deployments. It means resolving conflicts, and von der Leyen said recently that the military doesn't resolve conflict. Politics resolves conflict. The military is there to create a break in conflict."

That philosophy will guide any new European defense and security union.

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