



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during their bilateral meeting, Wednesday in Brussels, Belgium.

Trump rattles NATO, assails German, Russian relationship

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Under fire for his warm embrace of Russia's Vladimir Putin, President Donald Trump jolted the NATO summit Wednesday by turning a spotlight on Germany's ties to Russia and openly questioning the value of the military alliance that has defined American foreign policy for decades.

Trump declared that a joint natural gas pipeline venture with Moscow has left Angela Merkel's government "totally controlled" and "captive to Russia." So, in a stroke, he shifted attention away from his own ties to the Kremlin just days before he meets one-on-one with Putin.

With scorching language, the president questioned the necessity of the alliance that formed a bulwark against Soviet aggression, tweeting after a day of contentious meetings: "What good is NATO if Germany is paying Russia billions of dollars for gas and energy?"

German Chancellor Merkel hit back immediately, not only denying Trump's contention but suggesting that his comfortable upbringing in the U.S. gave him no standing to spout off on the world stage about Germany.

Drawing on her own background growing up in communist East Germany behind the Iron Curtain, she said:

"I've experienced myself

a part of Germany controlled by the Soviet Union, and I'm very happy today that we are united in freedom as the Federal Republic of Germany and can thus say that we can determine our own policies and make our own decisions and that's very good."

Trump demanded by public tweet that members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization "must pay 2% of GDP IMMEDIATELY, not by 2025" for their military efforts. He then rattled U.S. allies further by privately suggesting member nations should spend 4 percent of their gross domestic product on the military — more than even the United States currently pays, according to NATO statistics.

It was just the latest in Trump's demands and insults that critics fear will undermine a decades-old alliance launched to counter-balance Soviet aggression after World War II. And it came just days before Trump planned to sit down with Putin in Finland at the conclusion of what has become a contentious European trip.

Trump has spent weeks berating members of the alliance for failing to increase military spending, accusing Europe of freeloading off the U.S. and even raising doubts about whether he would come to members' defense as required if they were ever attacked.

Trump's tongue-lashing accelerated during a pre-summit breakfast, when he traded his usual long-dis-

tance Twitter attacks for a face-to-face confrontation with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

"We're supposed to protect you against Russia but they're paying billions of dollars to Russia and I think that's very inappropriate," Trump said, repeatedly describing Germany as "captive to Russia" because of the energy deal. He urged NATO to look into the issue.

Trump's harsh words for Merkel, whose country has hosted tens of thousands of U.S. troops that have been key to post-WWII stability in Europe for seven decades, struck at the core of the alliance. West Germany joined NATO in 1955 and was a critical factor in the alliance's success in facing down the Soviet Union until its collapse. Reunited with the East, Germany became the largest European economy in NATO in 1990.

The president's beef was with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that would bring gas from Russia to Germany's northeastern Baltic coast, bypassing Eastern European nations like Poland and Ukraine and doubling the amount of gas Russia can send directly to Germany. The vast undersea pipeline is opposed by the U.S. and some other EU members, who warn it could give Moscow greater leverage over Western Europe. It's expected to be online at the end of 2019.

Environmental-conscious Germany is trying to reduce

its reliance on coal and is phasing out nuclear power by 2022, so it hopes to use natural gas to partially fill the gap until the country's electricity grid can cope with fluctuating levels provided by renewable energy.

Hours after the breakfast, Merkel and Trump appeared to play nice as they met along the summit's sidelines. Trump told reporters the two had a "very, very good relationship" and congratulated Merkel on her "tremendous success."

While Trump went after Germany for its ties to Russia, he himself has been accused by critics of being too eager to improve relations with Moscow. He's also dismissed the U.S. intelligence community's assessment that Russia tried to undermine Western democracy by meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election to help him win.

Trump also lobbed fresh complaints about allies' "delinquent" defense spending and suggested at one point that NATO allies commit to spending 4 percent of their GDP on defense — twice the goal they've set for 2024.

"I have great confidence they'll be spending more," he said.

However, a formal summit declaration issued by the NATO leaders Wednesday reaffirmed their "unwavering commitment" to the 2 percent pledge set in 2014 and made no reference to any effort to go higher.

China vows retaliation for \$200 billion U.S. tariff threat

BEIJING (AP) — China's government vowed Wednesday to take "firm and forceful measures" as the U.S. threatened to expand tariffs to thousands of Chinese imports like fish sticks, apples and French doors, the latest salvo in an escalating trade dispute that threatens to chill global economic growth.

China gave no details, but it has plenty of options to retaliate that could extend beyond additional tariffs on U.S. imports. There are fears that Beijing could attempt to disrupt operations of American automakers, retailers and others that see China as a key market.

The spiraling conflict stems from Washington's complaint that Beijing steals or pressures companies to hand over technology and concerns that plans for state-led development of Chinese champions in robots and other fields might erode American industrial leadership.

A possible second round of tariff hikes announced Tuesday by the U.S. Trade Representative targets a \$200 billion list of Chinese goods. That came four days after Washington added 25 percent duties on \$34 billion worth of Chinese goods and Beijing responded by increasing taxes on the same amount of American imports.

The abrupt escalation is "totally unacceptable," said a Commerce Ministry statement. It said Beijing would take unspecified "necessary countermeasures" to protect its "core interests."

Asked what Beijing would do, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying gave no details

but said, "We will take firm and forceful measures."

The USTR, the federal agency that oversees international trade policy and negotiations, said it was responding to Beijing's decision to retaliate instead of changing its policies. President Donald Trump has threatened higher tariffs on more than \$500 billion of goods, or nearly all of China's annual exports to the United States.

The first U.S. tariff list focused on Chinese industrial products, an attempt to reduce the direct impact on American consumers.

The new list includes vacuum cleaners, furniture, auto and bicycle parts, French doors and plywood. It left untouched U.S.-branded smartphones and laptop computers.

That "will hit the Chinese export sector hard," said Rajiv Biswas of IHS Markit in a report.

China imports far less from the U.S. than the U.S. imports from China. That means China's imports of U.S. goods are so small that Beijing "cannot match fresh U.S. tariffs," said Vishnu Varathan of Mizuho Bank in a report.

China bought \$130 billion of U.S. goods last year. Both governments have raised tariffs on \$34 billion worth of each other's goods and already said they are considering additional charges on another \$16 billion. That would leave China only \$80 billion for further retaliation.



AP Photo/Andy Wong

Imported nuts from the United States are displayed for sale at a hypermarket in Beijing on Wednesday. China's government has criticized the latest U.S. threat of a tariff hike as "totally unacceptable" and vowed to retaliate in their escalating trade war.

BRIEFLY

U.S. soon to leapfrog Saudis, Russia as top oil producer

WASHINGTON (AP)—The U.S. is on pace to leapfrog both Saudi Arabia and Russia and reclaim the title of the world's biggest oil producer for the first time since the 1970s.

The latest forecast from the U.S. Energy Information Administration predicts that U.S. output will grow next year to 11.8 million barrels a day.

Saudi Arabia and Russia could upend that forecast by boosting their own production. In the face of rising global oil prices, members of the OPEC cartel and a few non-members including Russia agreed last month

to ease production caps that had contributed to the run-up in prices.

The United States led the world in oil production for much of the 20th century, but the Soviet Union surpassed America in 1974, and Saudi Arabia did the same in 1976, according to Energy Department figures.

By the end of the 1970s the USSR was producing one-third more oil than the U.S.; by the end of the 1980s, Soviet output was nearly double that of the United States.

U.S. Navy now allows women to wear ponytails

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — The Navy says it

will now allow servicewomen to sport ponytails and other hairstyles, reversing a policy that long forbade females from letting their hair down.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson said it makes the Navy more inclusive.

Many black women had asked for changes to the female grooming standards. A female sailor, Yeoman First Class LaToya Jones, announced the new policy during a Facebook Live event Tuesday with Richardson. The new standards went into effect Wednesday.

Lock hairstyles, or rope-like strands, are also now allowed. Wider hair buns too. And women can wear ponytails while in uniform.

Execution blocked after company objects to use of its drug

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A Nevada judge effectively blocked the execution of a two-time killer Wednesday after a pharmaceutical company objected to the use of one of its drugs to put someone to death.

Clark County District Judge Elizabeth Gonzalez disallowed the drug in a ruling that came less than nine hours before Scott Raymond Dozier, 47, was to be executed by injection with a three-chemical combination never before tried in the U.S.

State prison officials later called off the 8 p.m. execution, and a judge issued an

order indefinitely postponing it. Despite the maneuvering around him, Dozier had expressed his desire to be put to death and had stopped fighting for his life.

At a hearing earlier in the day, New Jersey-based Alvogen urged the judge to block the use of its sedative midazolam, saying the state illegally secured the product through subterfuge and intended it for unapproved purposes.

Nobel widow allowed to leave China after long house arrest

BERLIN (AP) — In 2010, Liu Xia traveled to a prison in northeast China to

tell her husband, dissident intellectual Liu Xiaobo, that he had just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. That was the last time she left home as a free woman. Until now.

China allowed her to leave the country Tuesday, ending an eight-year house arrest that made the soft-spoken, chain-smoking 57-year-old poet with a shaven head a tragic icon.

The release of Liu Xia, who was never charged with a crime, results from years of campaigning by Western governments and activists and comes just days before the one-year anniversary of Liu Xiaobo's death. The couple had become symbols of the government's determination to prevent them from inspiring other Chinese.

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