



In surprising request, Trump asks NATO to do more in Mideast

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President Donald Trump said Wednesday that he would ask NATO to step up its involvement in the Middle East, an unexpected request from a president who in the past has questioned the relevance of the transatlantic alliance and split with some member nations over his approach to Iran.

Trump didn't detail what further involvement he wants from the 29-member alliance. But last month he called on NATO allies to do more in combating the remnants of the Islamic State group, including his long-standing demand for them to take back and prosecute foreign fighters from their countries.

"Today, I am going to ask NATO to become much more involved in the Middle East process," Trump said during his first public comments on Iran's military strikes targeting U.S. troops stationed in Iraq. The strikes did not cause any U.S. or Iraqi casualties.

Trump spoke with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg by phone Wednesday about the situation.

"They agreed that NATO could contribute more to regional stability and the fight against international terrorism," NATO said in a statement.

The administration has been at odds with some leading NATO members, including Britain, Germany and France, over Trump's 2018 decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear agreement that had been brokered during the Obama administration.

The accord limited Iran's uranium enrichment program in exchange for an easing of sanctions. Trump and other critics felt the deal gave Tehran too many economic benefits without doing enough to prevent Iran from eventually developing a nuclear weapon.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said that Trump's latest call for NATO to get more involved is partly about his long-sought desire for allies to share more of the burden and partly about sending a message to Iran that he has "full backing of its European allies."

"I think he's going to be disappointed," Carpenter added. "He wants to have it both ways — that the United States can do whatever it wants, wherever it wants, whenever it wants, but that we can

still call on allies to support policies in which they have had no input or some cases have had grave doubts about.”

As tensions between the U.S. and Iran escalated in recent days, NATO and several European nations that are part of the coalition to defeat the Islamic State group or are participating in training Iraq’s fledgling military and police temporarily moved troops out of the country.

“The challenge that the president faces in getting NATO allies more involved is that without U.S. force protection, our allies cannot sustain themselves in Iraq,” said Heather Conley, director of the Europe program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “I’m not sure if the president saying getting NATO more involved is just code word for getting the alliance to show more support for us in terms of Iran.”

Even as he called for greater NATO involvement, Trump sought to emphasize U.S. military strength, arguing that American military might and economic strength are the best deterrents to war.

In the past, Trump has frequently criticized NATO as obsolete and has encouraged participants to increase their military spending.

White House officials say that before Trump took office, just four NATO members had reached the 2% benchmark for military spending set in 2014. Now there are nine, and 18 of the 29 are projected to meet the benchmark by 2024.